

# GOSPEL MEDITATIONS



"It is a privilege for me to be allowed to write a foreword to a book by Dr. Alfred O'Reilly, former President of University College, Cork. He is such a well-known contemporary figure, and a distinguished scholar in many fields, the fields, for example, of the physical sciences and moral and political philosophy. Despite his many duties and the diversity of his labours, he has kept steadily all his life to his first love, the Gospels. For years he has been gathering material for a series of studies on the Gospels, and some years ago he published a first instalment on *The Family at Bethany*. The care and high quality of that study has made readers of it impatiently await the volumes due to come.

"In the meantime he has kept satisfied and whetted our appetites by the publication of this present book of *Gospel Meditations*. They are meditations of an unusual form. We are accustomed to books of meditation in which the author briefly narrates an incident of Our Lord's life and then develops at length spiritual and moral points which seem to be relevant to the incident. Here some points are suggested briefly at the end, but it is the incident itself, as told in the words of the Evangelists, which is made to provide all that is needed for meditation. So thorough is the study of the text that the reader is reminded at times of Daniel-Rops or P. Laprade or Romano Guardini. But whereas Daniel-Rops in his *Jesus in His Time* brings us close to Christ by writing history, and P. Laprade by accurate legends, Dr. O'Reilly uses a number

Looking at him as

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ALFRED O'RAHILLY

*Edited & Forwarded by*  
M. C. D'ARCY, S.J.



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*With a Foreword by*

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DUBLIN

WIND ORIGIN :

ROBERT A. CORNELL,  
GENERAL TRUCK, DUBLIN.

*Dublin, 26<sup>th</sup> November, 1917.*

WIND ORIGIN :

✦ MARTIN CARTER,  
ARCHER, DUBLIN,  
HENDRICKS PLAZA.

REVERENDISSIMO DOMINO

IOANNI CAROLO McQUAID

ARCHIEPISCOPO DUBLINENSIS, HIBERNIAE PRIMATI

QUE ME BENIGNENTEM AD SACROS ORDINES PROMOVIT





## Preface

THIS unpretentious volume has no claim to scholarship or originality. It is an attempt to give simple studies of a hundred Gospel incidents, without neglecting the historical background or the spiritual lessons involved. I am engaged in preparing a more detailed study of the Life of Our Lord. It was my friend Father V. J. Dixan, C.S.Sp., who urged me to publish this popular book in the meantime.

This condensed treatment involves some sacrifice of clarity and vividness. I had to omit some topics altogether (e.g. the Eucharist) as they would require greater elaboration. I tried to limit each meditation to two pages. But I did not succeed. When a meditation spilled over and left a largely blank page, I have generally made an addition enclosed within square brackets, or (in the case of the Passion) included an illustration.

The section on the Passion, which forms a practically continuous narrative, was published in the *Irish Press* during the Lent of 1967. I was encouraged by numerous requests to re-issue the articles. So I hope that, though this work is rather different from the usual "meditation book," it will be found helpful by religious. But I think that it is also suitable for layfolk who wish to deepen their knowledge of the Gospels. In fact it was largely compiled while I myself was a layman.

"It is from the Gospels that I derive most help in the time of prayer," wrote St. Thérèse. "I find in their pages all that my poor soul needs, and I am always discovering there new lights and hidden mysterious meanings."

ALBERT O'RAHILLY.



## Foreword

It is a privilege for me to be allowed to write a foreword to a book by Dr. Alfred O'Rahilly, former President of University College, Cork. He is such a well-known contemporary figure, and a distinguished scholar in many fields, the fields, for example, of the physical sciences and social and political philosophy. Despite his many duties and the diversity of his labours, he has kept steadily all his life to his first love, the Gospels. For years he has been gathering material for a series of studies on the Gospels, and some years ago he published a first instalment on *The Family at Bethany*. The rare and high quality of that study has made readers of it impatiently await the volumes due to come.

In the meantime he has both satisfied and whetted our appetites by the publication of this present book of GOSPEL MEDITATIONS. They are meditations of an unusual form. We are accustomed to books of meditation in which the author briefly narrates an incident of Our Lord's life and then develops at length spiritual and moral points which seem to be relevant to the incident. Here some points are suggested briefly at the end, but it is the incident itself, as told in the words of the Evangelists, which is made to provide all that is needed for meditation. So thorough is the study of the text that the reader is reminded at times of Daniel-Rops or P. Lagrange or Romano Guardini. But whereas Daniel-Rops in his *Jesus in His Time* brings us close to Christ by writing history, and P. Lagrange by accurate exegesis, Dr. O'Rahilly uses a similar historical and exegetical scholarship to make the Gospel text itself speak to us its message. All his learning, accumulated during fifty years and more of study, is tempered to this one purpose. Hence in contrast with Romano Guardini, who in his *The Lord* turns reflection into an art to build up a portrait

of Christ, the eyes of the author of these meditations are ever upon the words of the Gospel, "as the eyes of the handmaid are on the hands of her mistress." What is true of all great literature is above all verified in the inspired word, that newness is always to be found there by those who seek with eyes of faith and love, especially so in this case when a highly qualified scholar reflects upon the meaning of each sentence. He is saying to himself, and to us: *he did it Christus*; and it will be, I am sure, a surprise to every reader to discover how often he has learnt something new and illuminating. Texts, which he has read and repeated to himself for years, will take on a fresh significance and give an unexpected insight into the mind and attitude of Christ and His Mother, the Apostles and the other persons who appear in the Gospels.

It would be easy for me to give examples of this wisdom and to refer the reader to meditations and passages which are especially enlightening; but it is better for the reader to choose for himself. All, however, will be held by the meditations on the Passion, and store away something from them in their memories for future thought. Dr. O'Rahilly has clearly pondered for long on the narratives of the Passion and mastered its literature. Scholars have differed about the times and sequences of the trials, in relation to the Passover, the parts played by the Jews and Romans and many of the details. An immense care is manifest in these meditations to arrive at the truth, and as a result they give us a moving and wonderfully integrated picture of the drama of our Redemption. They complete a series of studies by which our vision of the mystery of Christ has been enlarged. The labour given to this book has certainly been one of love.

M. C. D'ANCT, S.J.

September 28th, 1957.

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## An Angel goes to Nazareth

Luke 1, 26-38.

We are told that, about two millennia ago, God sent an angel with a message to a young girl living in a village of Upper Palestine. There is no description of the angel, just the bare fact of his embassy. The interview between God's envoy and Mary took place in the privacy of a house and was quite unknown to men. The apocryphal tradition that she was at the fountain must be rejected; that would be a most unlikely spot, the place where village gossip was retailed.

This daughter of the house of David must have been brought up in Jerusalem or Bethlehem. We hear of her first in Nazareth, when she appears to be an orphan. If she had lived with her parents, there would be some trace in the text. Would she not have confided first in her mother instead of a distant cousin? She was alone in Nazareth, she had no friend or confidant to whom she could tell the wondrous news. There is reason to think that she and Joseph intended to settle in Bethlehem.

The heavenly embassy was to a simple village maiden, not to a prophetess, not to a queen, not to a great religious leader. Not to a great mansion, but to a little house on the street. Not to Rome, Athens or Jerusalem, but to an obscure and unimportant village in Galilee. But Nazareth has been immortalised and made world-famous by this event. For it was the greatest

mision of all time, the most momentous transaction in man's story. It took place in order to negotiate God's Incarnation and consequently to effect our Redemption. Three times every day it is recalled to us by the pealing of bells and by the *Angelus* prayer. No other event in history is so commemorated.

Never before or since did an angel address a human being so reverently. "On coming into her presence the angel said: Rejoice, child of grace! The Lord is with you."<sup>1</sup> The Greek perfect participle ("having been graced") denotes something stable and permanent. The English "graced" (or "highly favoured") might suggest that some high favour was then given, whereas the Greek word implies past action. Hence the Latin, Syriac and Coptic versions use a paraphrase and render the epithet "full of grace." Mary possessed the fullness of God's favour.

The label "gracious" will not do. Nor can we accept the Protestant assumption that grace is mere external approbation. She was spiritually "graced," with inner gifts independent of talent or culture; her soul was prepared by God for her unique destiny. Says St. Epiphanius in the fourth century: "In all her ways she was filled with divine grace." And St. Peter Chrysologus in the fifth: "Grace is granted in parts to individuals, but to Mary the plenitude of grace was totally given." And so all the Eastern Churches. The Orthodox Confession of 1640 declares that Mary "shared in God's grace more richly than any other creature."

Mary had fitting natural qualities also. This child of fourteen or fifteen was thoughtful beyond her years. She was not taken off her guard nor dazzled by the vision; in this supreme moment

<sup>1</sup> The Vulgate, with some support, adds: *blest are you among women*. This is a Hebrew way of saying: You are the most blessed of women. But the phrase has probably come from Elizabeth's greeting (verse 42).

she remained mistress of herself. "At these words she was perturbed, and she began to ask herself what could be the meaning of this greeting." She did not doubt the authenticity of her vision. But with humility and prudence, she silently reflected on the significance of this laudatory salutation.

"Have no fear, Mary," said the angel. "For you have found grace with God. You are to be a mother and to bear a Son, whom you are to call Jesus." This was an Oriental way of asking for her consent. When, after information, Mary uttered her fiat, this supposes that she could have refused. There was no reference to a husband, as would be expected in such an announcement; it was she who was to give her Son His name.

Gabriel proceeded to specify the Son she was to bear: "He will be great and will be titled the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give Him the throne of His ancestor David. He will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever, and His kingship will never end." To us of to-day these words sound strange and seem antiquated. But Mary, let us not forget, was steeped in the Old Testament and in the aspirations of her people. God adapts His message to the cultural and religious environment of the recipient.

Mary understood that the angel was inviting her to be the mother of the Messiah, whose divinity is not explicitly affirmed. God's revelations are always gradual and progressive. It is not certain that at this stage she was explicitly conscious of a proposed divine maternity. Like us, even Mary slowly acquired a fuller understanding of the Incarnation.

We might have expected—as we read in the lives of some saints—that this would be the beginning of angelic visions in the life of Our Lady. But no. Her sublime vocation was announced to her by an angel. After that, any necessary

directions came to her through Joseph. The most privileged of creatures, after this one heavenly visitation, lived a life of ordinary duties and cares.

[Old legends concerning Mary's early life have greatly influenced religious art and popular devotion. Thus the so-called Presentation of Mary, her introduction to life in the Temple at the age of three. We should interpret this as a symbol of her devout life as a child. We do not know how she became engaged to Joseph. But we can hardly accept the story that her hand was given to the recipient of a prodigy: Joseph, among other aspirants, being chosen through a miraculously blossoming rod (still represented in his statues). The same sources depict him as an aged man or as a widower with sons. These accretions should not divert us from the simple brevity of the Gospels.]

"How little is known of the life of the Blessed Virgin! It is not well to say things about her that are unlikely or that we do not know for certain. For example: that it was with feelings of extraordinary fervour and on fire with love that at the age of three she went to the Temple to offer herself to God. Perhaps she went quite simply in obedience to her parents!"—St. Thérèse (Norinaux Folie).

The derivation of the name Mary—Hebrew *Maryam*, Aramaic *Maryam*—is uncertain. But it was later taken as equivalent to lady or princess. St. Jerome suggested *mar-yam*, drop of the sea: in Latin *stella maris*. This, by a happy fault of transcription became *stella maris*, star of the sea.]

## 2

# Our Lady gives her Consent

Luke 1, 34-38.

The angel made to Mary the most wonderful offer and promise that ever came to a Jewish girl: to be the mother of the Messiah. The proposed honour, however, did not make her lose her calm self-possession, for she was mature and thoughtful beyond her years. She reflected on the proposal and then quietly put a most pertinent question as to the manner in which the privilege was to be effected: "How is this to happen? For I am a virgin."

She spoke with respectful candour of the natural laws of life; she was a model of discretion and simplicity in a delicate situation. She was faced with a problem which she states with mingled modesty and firmness. Virginity and maternity: how reconcile these two calls of God? She asked for a solution. She did not express any doubt concerning the message, nor did she lay down any condition for acceptance. In putting the query she had no thought of refusal. There was no unconditional insistence on virginity, and nothing derogatory to marriage. She left the matter in God's hands for decision.

The dogmatic essential is the virginity of God's Mother, the miraculous supercession of the natural mode of maternity. But we are not fully informed about the actual background of circumstances. The traditional and by far the most probable interpretation is that Our Lady had made a resolution of

virginity.<sup>1</sup> If she were married under the ordinary conditions, or were shortly to be thus married, there would be no point in her surprise, or in her asking "how." So we can take Mary as saying: I have resolved to remain a virgin.<sup>2</sup>

This, of course, would require the concurrence of Joseph, inspired by the same ideal. She may well have been already married to him at this time. If so, we can interpret his reaction when he learnt of her condition as a doubt whether he had the right to retain wife and child, both of whom belonged to God. Every Jew knew the sacredness and intangibility of what belonged to God. A similar reverential awe would have possessed him if he were merely engaged.<sup>3</sup>

The angel did not take advantage of Mary's indecision to snatch a quick assent. Mary's agreement must be given voluntarily and deliberately, without coercion or hurry. He carefully explained that virginity would be no obstacle, for the Child would have no earthly father.

Now God could conceivably have acted otherwise. The Greeks thought it unworthy of Him to become Man; heretics thought that He should not have started in the womb. Yet God chose prenatal life and full manhood. And this could have occurred without Mary's knowledge or consent. But God has a wonderful respect for human freedom. He desired

<sup>1</sup> The present tense in Greek (especially in a negative form) often denotes a durative state. The aspect of permanence in a present state can be perfectly expressed by a Sanskrit participle.

<sup>2</sup> From recently discovered documents (in Qumran near Jericho) we learn that the ideal of religious virginity was already established in Judaism and had been adopted in certain religious communities. The concurrence of Joseph and Mary would then not be a unique exception.

<sup>3</sup> Some recent Catholic writers have proposed another interpretation. Mary had as yet no husband, she would not be married for some time yet. Like other young Jewish women she looked forward to marriage. But God intervened; and, with Joseph's concurrence, she consecrated herself to God. This explanation is natural enough and adequate to the rights of the dogma. But it hardly does justice back to the text and to tradition.



a human mother like each of us, but only by securing Mary's voluntary co-operation.

Our Lady was not merely a physical instrument. She was prepared, grace-endowed and chosen, so that she might positively and spiritually co-operate. How wonderful it was that all Heaven, even God Himself, was waiting for the consent of His lowly handmaid. There is a famous passage in St. Bernard:

"The angel is waiting for an answer; it is time for him to return to God who sent him. We too, Lady, are waiting for a word of pity, we who are crushed by the sentence of condemnation. . . . The whole world, prostrate at your feet, is waiting. . . . Why do you delay? Why are you in trepidation? Believe, confess, consent."

"I am the Lord's servant maid. Let what you propose be done to me." Never was a phrase on human lips fraught with such momentous consequences. When she uttered her fiat, Mary became in body the Mother of God. And spiritually she became our mother. As St. Augustine says: "Clearly she became the mother of us, His members. For she lovingly co-operated so that the faithful, who are members of the Head, might be born in the Church." To Mary we owe Jesus. God loved the world so much that He gave us His only Son—through Mary.

Many times daily we repeat the angel's salutation: "Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you." Thus we remind Our Lady of the role she accepted on behalf of us all, to enable her Son to save us. And we confidently appeal to her to continue her co-operation by praying for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

### 3

## Mary's Visit to Elizabeth

Luke 1. 39-45, 56.

THE angel's reference to Mary's elderly cousin was a divine confirmation of her own experience. It was also a suggestion that she should give loving service to her aged relative at a time when her help and companionship would be appreciated.

Our Lady showed marvellous reticence and self-control in leaving to God the revelation of her own secret. But surely she herself felt the need of speaking to an older and experienced woman friend. So, perhaps joining a caravan, she next undertook the three or four days' journey to Jerusalem, and then five miles west to the little town of Karem.

She joyfully greeted Elizabeth, who was not only older but of higher social status. Had the visit occurred a few months previously, Zachary's wife would have taken for granted this respectful salutation of her relative and not regarded the visit as a great condescension.

But now Elizabeth, inspired by God, cried out: "You are the most blessed of women. Blessed, too, is the Child you bear. But why am I thus honoured by a visit from the Mother of my Lord?" Elizabeth was the first to pay due homage to Our Lady. The mother of "the greatest born of woman," given to her miraculously, assigns to Mary a place immeasurably superior to her own.

At this stage, the Incarnation—now the creed of millions—was known only to these two women. But Our Lord was already at work; this was the first missionary journey of the Incarnate. Beneath the motives affecting the visit there lay God's design to sanctify the unborn John. So Mary brought Jesus to His Forerunner.

She stayed with Elizabeth for about three months, surely until after the birth of John, giving help and companionship to her kinswoman. Says the *Life of Christ* attributed to St. Bonaventure: "Consider the greatness of John. No one ever had such a nurse." Père Bazy writes: "She held in her arms and pressed gently to her bosom the little herald-to-be, as if to give him the first kiss of Jesus."

We, too, can appeal to Mary to bring us to Jesus. While thus spiritually mothering us, she has also in her earthly life given us an example of simple, homely service to others.

Some points. (1) Mary was not only naturally reticent but had been placed in a painful predicament. By telling her of the analogous case of her cousin, Gabriel indicated who could be her confidant and helper, for Mary must have been lonely and isolated. (2) What a joy and a relief it was to Mary to learn from Elizabeth's greeting that, discreetly enlightened, her condition was known. (3) Elizabeth too welcomed companionship, for she had gone "on retreat" when she knew she was to become a mother. (4) The incident provides the first homage paid to the Incarnate. It was a prelude of Mary's mission in the Church: to bring Jesus to us.]

## 4

# Our Lady's Canticle

Luke 1. 46-55.

When Mary heard Elizabeth's greeting her pent-up soul outpoured in words which the Church has adopted as vesper-hymn. But when first uttered it was a canticle of the dawn. It was more than a Jewish psalm, yet less than a developed Christian hymn.

There is in it a consciousness of nearness to the fulfilment of God's great promises, a humble acknowledgement of the high destiny to which God has called her. But Our Lord does not yet emerge in that clear light in which apostles and evangelists saw Him. It is a product exactly appropriate to this one moment of religious history: the threshold from B.C. to A.D. As such it indicates the gentle, gradual guidance of God's self-revelation even to chosen souls.

It is impregnated with biblical reminiscences of thought and language; thus it shows Mary's union with her people and their religion. This young girl was no pious little soul confined to the narrow circle of her immediate kindfolk. All the hopes and sorrows of Israel were enshrined in her heart, through the treasures of Scripture, a religious upbringing and her very environment—Carmel, Megiddo, Thabor, Gilboa, as well as Jerusalem—which was redolent of Hebrew history.

Modern book-pedants, ignorant of oral cultures, find it hard to believe that Mary could spontaneously utter this song. But a knowledge of the East—or even of the Irish bards—reveals

the prevalence of oral transmission and improvisation of rhythmic recitations.

Here is an attempt at a rhymed translation of the *Magnificat*. (It should be remembered that in Old Testament language the hungry and the poor were those "lowly" who—unlike the proud and the "rich"—were submissive to God's will and acknowledged their dependence on Him. And "fear" means worshipful reverence.)

*Let my soul awaking sing  
The praise of the Lord, my King.  
For my Saviour most holy  
Has come to His handmaid lowly.*

*The Almighty has become my guest;  
Henceforth all will call me blest.  
Revered for ever may He be  
Who has such great things done for me.*

*From age to age His mercy  
Has reached out to all who fear.  
Though strong-armed in victory,  
To the lowly He drew near.*

*On the proud did He tread,  
Powerless ejected.  
The hungry He has fed,  
And the rich rejected.*

*To Israel has He come at last,  
Remembering His ancient past,  
The promise He did swear  
To Abraham our forebear  
For ever.*

## 5

# Zachary's Hymn

Luke 1. 68-79.

When Zachary's son was, a week after birth, to be given a name, the relatives proposed to have the child called after his father. But the parents had agreed to call him John (Yohanan, God's grace). The father confirmed this in writing and immediately recovered his speech. He burst into the improvised hymn which we know as the *Benedictus*, which the Church has adopted as the hymn for Lauds. It is as Hebrew and biblical as the *Magnificat*; but it is more obscure and the Greek text is more cumbersome. Let us see what we can make of its meaning in a free translation.

"Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel! For He is coming to His people to effect their deliverance and is raising up for us a mighty Saviour in the lineage of David His servant."

The past tenses, used with a vivid sense of prophetic realisation, probably stand for present and future. The reference is clearly to the Messiah about to be born; for neither Zachary nor Elizabeth was a descendant of David. *Horn* was a common Hebrew metaphor, alluding to the fact that the power of the aurochs (or bison) lay in its horns. So "horn of salvation" means "a mighty saviour." "I will make a horn to spring up for David" (Ps. 131, 17). Then (and now) every Jew included in his daily prayer the petition: "Raise up David's horn by

Your salvation." Zachary therefore announced the immediate coming of the Messiah, Mary's Child about whom he and his wife were informed.

"Long ago He had, through the mouth of His holy prophets, promised to save us from our enemies, from the power of those who hate us. Thus, fulfilling the mercy shown to our forefathers, He remembers the sacred covenant sworn to our father Abraham: to enable us, freed from fear and delivered from the power of our enemies, to serve Him, in holiness and religious observance, in His presence, all our days."

The old priest, like his contemporaries, associated his mundane expectation with deliverance from the pagan infiltration of Herodian rule and the domination of Rome, not for political but for religious reasons. (It was Christ who later dissociated nationalism and religion.)

"Through the merciful heart of our God, there is to come to us from on high the Light who will shine on those dwelling in death's dark shadow and guide our feet into the path of peace."

"Bowels of mercy" is rather a repellent phrase to-day; there is a Hebrew word which means both entrails and mercy. The Greek *anale* (Latin *erige*) is not clear; it cannot mean the process of rising, for it is connected with "on high." As in Luke 60, 1, it represents a Hebrew word denoting the sun itself as a symbol of the Messiah. Men are like dark-bound travellers awaiting the light to show them the right path.

Thus the old man chanted the poem of the coming of Mary's Son, in language not easily intelligible to us to-day, though familiar to contemporaries and in keeping with the few documents which have survived from that time. It is appropriate to its historical context, in harmony with Jewish ideas but

remote from the terminology of Christians after Pentecost. It could not have been written fifty years later.

The remaining two verses, best placed at the end, are Zachary's apostrophe to his newborn son in his role of Precursor:

"And you, child, will be acclaimed a prophet of the Most High. For you will go before the Lord, preparing the way for Him, to give to His people the knowledge of salvation through forgiveness of their sins."

Zachary is repeating what the angel had predicted: "He will go before Him with the spirit and the power of Elias" (Luke 1. 17). John indeed was regarded as a prophet (Matt. 14. 5), the next after Malachy who, nearly five centuries previously, had foretold such a messenger to prepare God's way (Malachy 3. 1). John's mission was to teach the people that salvation does not consist in political success but in the remission of sins.

When we repeat the *Azazel*us, the canticle of a pre-Christian Jewish priest, it is helpful to picture ourselves back, with Mary and Elizabeth, in that brief dawn which ushered in Jesus, the Light of the World.



## 6

# The Birth of Our Lord

Luke 2, 4-7.

THE ancients had various ways of numbering the years. It is only in the sixth century that our present notation—*a.d.* and *a.b.*—was adopted. We number our years from the birth of Jesus as the greatest event in the world's history. Yet at the time it was an obscure, little-known happening. As our picture of it has been greatly influenced by apocryphal writings, mediæval plays, modern cribs, etc., it will be useful briefly to consider the Gospel text.

"Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee up to David's town of Bethlehem—for he was of the family and lineage of David—in order to be registered there, with Mary his betrothed wife who was pregnant."

Joseph had probably resided in Nazareth for some years, for he seems to have had few friends in Bethlehem. Joseph owned a small ancestral property there which he had to register personally for purposes of taxation. This was his reason for his journey. But he meant to settle permanently in Bethlehem. So he brought Mary with him. He came betimes for he wished to protect her good name.

"While they were there, the time for her delivery came."

There is no suggestion that the birth occurred on the night of their arrival. This supposition is due to the idea that the

registration was, like a modern census, made in one day; whereas an interval of some months was allowed. It was most unlikely that the eighty miles journey of four days would have been deferred until Mary was in this condition. There were serious reasons of prudence for leaving Nazareth earlier, even several months beforehand. So we must give up the idea of a village crammed with people for a one-day census.

"She gave birth to her first-born Son."

Neither in Jewish Law nor in current Greek did "first-born" necessarily imply any subsequent children. In this short sentence we are told of the marvellous event of the Nativity. It has always been the Church's belief—attested as early as the first century—that the birth took place miraculously.

"She bandaged Him."

Our Lady herself, apparently without help, followed the Eastern custom, still the practice in Palestine, of wrapping the newborn infant in a cloth from shoulders to ankles. From the expensive "swaddling-clothes" we must not fancy that the Babe was wrapped in rags because His parents could not afford baby-clothes. The traditional tableau—a smiling infant, with a radiant nimbus, with arms outstretched to welcome us—is true only to the eyes of faith. Let us not forget the physical reality: a helpless wrapped-up Baby. "He, through Whom not even the birds go hungry, was fed with a little milk."

"Because there was no room for them in the Guest-House, she laid Him to rest in the Stable."

There was, of course, no inn or hotel in our sense in the village. It was unlikely that there was even a *khan*, an open veranda round a courtyard for travellers; for Bethlehem was not on a main road. But there was a public guest-house, under the local sheikh. Or Joseph and Mary may have been staying in private lodgings or in the house of a relative. There was

no privacy except in the stable. The word used can mean either manger (or rather feeding-trough) or a stable. "The Stable," an opening in the side of a hill, was sufficient indication to guide the shepherds; it was well understood by them; and it was now empty, for the flocks were in the open.

How utterly simple and natural is this account! A seemingly ordinary married couple, with their household chattels, arrived in the village. They lodged in the public guest-house or with friends. The father had a small property to be registered, but he also had need for work as a carpenter. To secure privacy for the birth of the Child, they moved into the stable. When He was born the Mother cared for Him and fed Him just like other native mothers. No notice, no publicity, no excitement, at least on earth. Another child born to humble folk. Thus did God come into the world!

[Says St. Bernard: "Do not be afraid, do not run away. He is not now coming in anger. See, He has become an Infant, a small speechless Babe. His wailing cries should move you to compassion rather than to fright. . . . He has made Himself little; His Virgin Mother wraps Him in His poor baby-clothes. And are you still fearful and trembling?"

St. Ignatius in his *Spiritual Exercises*: "The first point is to see the persons, that is, to see Our Lady and Joseph and the handmaid and the Infant Jesus after He is born: making myself a poor bit of a body and an unworthy little servant, looking at them, studying them and serving them in their needs as if I were there present,"]

## 7

# Angels and Shepherds

Luke 2. 8-19.

From the balcony of the Casa Nova in Bethlehem one can look eastward down the terraced hillside, with its olives and vines, towards the pasture-lands which roll down to the Dead Sea. About half an hour's walk away, six hundred feet down, is the Shepherd's Field, where from time immemorial there has been a night-shelter (*Hilgdal Eder*) for flocks.

Further south could be seen the Frank Mountain, like a truncated cone, on which Herod had built a palace. The Christmas message, however, was not brought to royalty, but to a few simple men bivouacking in the open fields. They were probably nomads, not guardians of the villagers' sheep. Suddenly they saw a wondrous light and heard a voice: "I am bringing you joyful news for the whole nation: This night in David's town a Saviour has been born for you." Not a new theory of life, not an abstract code of behaviour. A living Person was announced, a historical event, the birth of the Messiah.

A year or so previously, a league of cities in Asia altered the calendar so as to begin the year with the birthday of Augustus. They made this proclamation:

"The birthday of the divine Emperor has brought us inexpressible joys and benefits. If we consider its importance, it has its equal only in the beginning of the

world. Were it not for the coming of the Emperor, the fortune of the universe, the world would have been devoted to imminent annihilation."

What a contrast between this flamboyant declaration, publicised through cities, engraved in stone and bronze, and the quiet message of an angel spoken in the night-time to a handful of unlettered nomads in the wilderness of Judea. Caesar and Christ, a contrast in appeal, a rivalry for men's souls, still existing to-day.

"Then suddenly there was with the angel a troop of the heavenly army, praising God in these words: Glory to God on high! On earth peace to men who please Him!" Literally: among men of (God's) good will. In one of the Dead Sea manuscripts we read of God's mercy, flowing on all the sons of His good will. There is no restriction involved. Peace is offered to all men, because God loves them. It was a message of peace broadcast from heaven. It was centred not on the advent of a warrior-king but on the birth of a helpless Baby.

Mary and Joseph did not hear the strains of the first *Gloria*. Their faith did not require physical audition. The celestial spirits were over the Stable, adoring their new-born King. The chants of the angelic choir resounded over Bethlehem; but they were heard only by a few shepherds. There was excitement in heaven, but seemingly commonplace life on earth. How hard it is to realise that there is a world of pure spirits who—if we may use spatial terms—are round about us. At Mass when we recite the *Gloria* we join our worship to that of these unseen heavenly hosts.

When the vision faded, the shepherds climbed up the hill to Bethlehem. They were the first of a countless crowd to kneel before the Crib. They were typical of the lowly folk who feel at home where God was homeless. Assured by the

angel's message, they were not shocked by finding the Child in a stable. "They found Mary and Joseph with the Infant lying in the manger.<sup>1</sup>"

Then back to their lonely work in the bleak, rocky pastures of Judæa. They spoke of their experience. But nobody seems to have bothered. There was no publicity; no concourse of people flocked to the Stable. The Incarnate Life had begun; and earthly life went on as before. Only His Mother remembered. "Mary treasured up all these events, pondering them in her soul." It is through her, directly or indirectly, that we learn them from St. Luke.

[These simple nomads were our forerunners and our representatives. The Baby in the Stable was but "a sign" to them. They saw deeper; beneath the trappings of poverty and weakness, they discerned their Saviour. Let us too go to Bethlehem; let us leave our ordinary tasks to pay a visit of homage to our Infant God, re-orientating our worldly wisdom with this divine paradox. And thus, like them, we shall not be misled by false Messiahs who steal Christ's message of Peace on Earth. The world has only one Saviour. He was born in a Stable at Bethlehem; and He died for us on Golgotha outside Jerusalem.]

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<sup>1</sup> Or perhaps we should translate: "in the Stable."

## 8

# The Infant in the Temple

Luke 1. 29-38.

THE Holy Family lived unobtrusively, submitting to all the prescriptions of the Jewish religion, even when divine exemption could be claimed. A week after birth the Child was circumcised and "christened" Jesus. For another happy month Joseph and Mary dwelt in Bethlehem. Then one morning, with the Child, they set out on the two hours' journey to Jerusalem. Entering the city by the Jaffa Gate near Herod's Palace, they passed—an obscure and unnoticed little group—through the crowded streets and then into the Temple enclosure.

They came for a double purpose. First for the Mother's "purification." Any time later than forty days after the birth of a boy, the Jewish mother had, personally or by a delegate, to attend at the Temple to offer a lamb and a bird, or (if poor as Our Lady was) two birds, for sacrifice. Purification after childbirth, prevalent in Semitic and other peoples, was a tribute to the mystery of life and did not imply moral fault. Still less does our ceremony of "churaching" to-day.

In the Latin rite for this feast stress is laid on the Purification of the Blessed Virgin. But in the East the festival is known as "The Meeting of Christ," i.e. with Simeon and Anna. For the parents had also brought the Child to be presented and ransomed. The first-born child, if a boy, had to be "redeemed"

by the payment of five shekels—a labourer's wages for ten days. This could, however, have been paid to any local priest.

A man called Simeon came up to the little group. He was not the priest who accepted and returned the Child when redeemed. Neither priest nor levite, he was a pious layman who had no part in official ceremonies. (There is just a possibility that he was Rabbi Simeon, son of Hillel and father of Gamaliel, who taught St. Paul.) We get the impression that Simeon was now an old man who had for years been expecting the Messiah and had been assured in prayer that he would have this privilege. He asked Mary for the honour of holding the Child in his arms. Then he uttered his valedictory prayer :

*Your servant, servant Lord,  
Is ready to depart,  
According to Your word,  
With quiet, peaceful heart.*

*For You have given him the sight  
Of the Saviour sent by You,  
To be for the world a Light  
And Israel's Glory too.*

This calm chant of adieu has from the earliest times been sung at evening in church. Simeon was the first Old Testament personage to greet death without fear. He would go in peace for he had seen the Messiah and had held Him in his arms. With what marvellously simple faith did the old man welcome this Baby!

His privilege is not as great as ours when in our temple we receive the God-Man into our souls. Nor could his ageing eyes have seen the full resplendence of the Light which has shone on us Gentiles.



From Simeon, too, we have the first, though indirect, reference to Jesus' future sufferings, as well as to the compassionate pain of His heart-pierced Mother.

This Child, he says, is to be the subject of contention; He is destined to be the occasion for the falling and for the rising of many. Is not this saying an epitome of subsequent history? Round His Person still wages the world's debate. He can be loved intensely; He can be reviled and hated; but He cannot be ignored. Even now, after twenty centuries, each generation, each of us individually, has to make a personal decision. Least of all to-day can we be neutral. We must be either for Christ or against Him.

"His father and His Mother were astonished." Only gradually did they understand the fullness of the new revelation. Even Our Lady grew in grace and knowledge. The *Nunc Dimittis* was used by God as a vehicle of revelation—Light for the Gentiles—beyond the *Magnificat*.

Nor must we imagine that, as a result of Simeon's vague foreboding, the cross cast a shadow over the Holy Family or that morbid anticipation marred the joyous childhood of Jesus. A colleague one day asked St. Thomas whether Mary did not sorrowfully recall Simeon's words seven times a day. He replied: "We should not preach these frivolities when there is so much real truth to be preached."

[St. Thérèse (in *Nervitense Fides*): "Why insist that the Blessed Virgin from that moment had constantly before her eyes the Passion of Jesus? . . . It was a prediction of what was to come later on."]

## The Men from the East

Matthew 2, 1-12.

THE Magi are exotic figures that flit anonymously across a page of the Gospel, fulfil their mission and then disappear mysteriously into the unknown. The majestic severity of St. Matthew was soon furnished with biographical accessories, which still linger in popular devotion and art: the visitors' number and nationality, their names and regal status, their dress, their star. We do not know whether they came from far-off Babylonia or from neighbouring Arabia. They seem to have been astrologer-priests of the strangely pure Zoroastrian religion of Persia.

We do not know what celestial phenomenon they observed. If not miraculous, it may have been a new star, a comet, even the conjunction of two planets. There is no suggestion that the star guided them to Jerusalem. They made the journey because they interpreted their observation to mean the birth of the King of the Jews. We know that at that time there was a widespread expectation of the Messiah as a great Ruler in Judea. The inculpably erroneous and inadequate views of the Magi did not ruin their quest; they followed the only light they had and God rewarded them.

In the feast of the Epiphany the early Church honoured the Magi as the first of us Gentiles to find Our Lord. They are the forerunners of the myriad pilgrims who, physically or mentally, journeyed from afar in search of Christ.

Their caravan eventually reached the Jewish metropolis. Seemingly unconscious of danger, with astonishing simplicity they loudly proclaimed that they had come to pay homage to the newborn King. The inhabitants were excited and even horrified by this audacity. For about thirty years they had been under a half-Jewish King, always on the look-out for rivals, ruthless in crushing opposition.

But old Herod graciously received these wealthy visitors; he was too astute to show his hand at this stage. He consulted the rabbis as to the birthplace of the Messiah. Bethlehem, they finally declared, quoting the prophet Micah. Folding up their scrolls, they ostentatiously professed to have no further interest. They were not going to risk their necks.

The crafty tyrant decided on a subtle manoeuvre, overplaying his hand, as the sequel proved. He sent the Magi without escort, quietly by night, on the six-mile journey south to Bethlehem. "Go," he said, "and make careful search for the Child. Then, when ye have found Him, report back to me so that I too may go and pay Him homage." Herod donned the mantle of benevolence, even of piety. It was the typical camouflage of religious persecution.

The travellers set out and were soon gladdened by the sight of the star over the village lying between two hills, perhaps even over the very house. "They found the Child with Mary, His Mother. Prostrating themselves, they paid Him homage."

How different from what they had expected: not the royal pomp of an earthly sovereign, but the humble dwelling of a poor Jewish child. What a prosaic ending to their romantic quest! But these men were exceptional and spiritual; they were able to divert themselves of the erroneous presuppositions of their upbringing. Aided by grace, they adjusted themselves to a new view of the Messiah: a task which was harder for those

wealthy, educated pagans than for the poor Jewish shepherds. They were the first of us to worship Jesus in His Mother's arms, kneeling as we do before the Madonna and Child.

Unpacking their caskets, they offered their gifts to Him. These were treasures which they brought not for trading nor for Herod. Writers have been busy interpreting them symbolically. But let us not forget their practical aspect; they must have provided the Holy Family with much-needed help for their expensive journey to Egypt.

Warned by a vision, the Magi managed to escape outwards by a more southern route without passing through Jerusalem and before Herod had time to become suspicious. Unable to locate the Child, the aged tyrant issued a frenzied order for the murder of the infant boys of Bethlehem.

[This brutal deed, the killing of a few dozen humble children, was not considered worth recording among Herod's more notorious blood-baths. These little sufferers, unconscious martyrs for Christ, were pioneers of 'baptism by blood.' About A.D. 400 Prudentius wrote a beautiful hymn about them: "Hail, flowers of martyrs, whom on the very threshold of life the persecutor of Christ cut down, like tender roadside scattered by the wind. Hail, first victims for Christ, tender lambs offered to Him. With childlike innocence you play around His altar, with palms and crowns the symbols of your martyrdom."]

## 10

# The Escape to Egypt

Mat. 2. 13-15.

"Get up! Take the Child and His Mother, and escape into Egypt. You are to stay there until I tell you to return. For Herod is going to look for the Child in order to put Him to death."

Am I to get up in the middle of the night and wake up the sleeping ones? I have never been down in Egypt; it would take well over a week to cross the desert to the Delta.

Such a journey would require preparation and directions. How long am I to remain in that pagan country? How can I earn a livelihood there? Why flight and exile at all? Cannot God protect His Son here?

Now, how did the angel answer these arguments? He didn't. For Joseph made no objections at all. He silently and instantly obeyed the abrupt commands. "He got up, he took the Child and His Mother that night, and he set out for Egypt." Before dawn the fugitives were already on the road to Gaza—the first of a long procession of refugees from anti-Christian tyranny.

Apocryphal accounts of the journey to Egypt fill the silence of the Gospels with miracles. The dragons of the desert crouched before their infant Lord, the palm-trees bowed down their fronded crests to supply fruit and shade, lepers were cured, idols fell to the ground. How utterly at variance with the simple human life of the Holy Family!

The sudden departure left little time for securing supplies for the long journey across the arid sands. Perhaps Joseph was able to join a caravan. He had all the responsibility and the worry. And in Egypt, probably among one of the Jewish colonies, he settled down to his trade, to support himself and his precious charges.

In family decisions Our Lady was quietly acquiescent. Both heaven and earth acknowledged Joseph's headship. At three moments of crisis he received a special revelation; each time only just enough for immediate action. No miraculous help, no guidance as to details, no picture of the future. Joseph was given an order, and he at once obeyed; the carrying out in detail was a matter for his own human decision.

After Herod's death, an angel told Joseph to return to "the land of Israel"—without further specification. The decision of details was left to himself. He would have preferred to live in Bethlehem. But he made inquiries and studied the political situation, finally deciding to settle with his charges under Antipas rather than under Archelaus. Subsequent events justified his prudent judgment. It is as a result of Joseph's own decision, taken after hesitation, that Jesus was brought up in Nazareth.

[We do not know exactly how old Jesus was when He was taken to Egypt, nor how long the Holy Family stayed there. The Romans calculated their years from the alleged date of the foundation of Rome. In A.D. 525 the Roman abbot Dionysius introduced the Christian era. He took the year 753 of Rome as 1 B.C., and 754 as A.D. 1. This was wrong, for Herod died on 3rd April, 750 (which would be 4 B.C.). Archelaus ruled Judea from his father's death until A.D. 6. Our Lord was born about the year 760 (7 B.C.).]

## II

### The Child Jesus

"As the Child grew in body, He grew stronger spiritually, His intelligence developed and He remained in God's favour." This is all that St. Luke (2. 40) tells us of the first twelve years of Jesus' life. And of His life from then until He was about thirty years he writes (2. 51):

"He then went down with them and returned to Nazareth, where He was subject to them. . . . And Jesus kept growing in intelligence as well as in stature, remaining in favour with God and man."

This great stretch of silence—broken only by one brief incident—is immensely impressive and mysterious. It upsets all our preconceived ideas of symmetry and fittingness. We secretly wish for a more notable boyhood, a more humanly distinguished Saviour, like the Nazarenes we are "scandalised." There is always a tendency to embellish the early life of one who in later life obtained renown. So even early in the Church legends were woven round the young Jesus. Theatrical misdeeds were attributed to Him, some of them mischievous and others revengeful. A distasteful contrast to the sober simplicity of the Gospel.

We must resist the temptation to dehumanise Our Lord. He passed through all the normal phases of infancy and boyhood. Always presiding from the inaccessible psychological mystery involved in the Incarnation, we can picture Him as growing.

as playing, as learning, as mixing with relatives and villagers. We can always fill up the reticent brevity of the Gospel by drawing on ordinary experience. As an infant He was nursed by Our Lady, then carried in her arms or on her shoulders, as is still done by Nazareth women. A Coptic homily (attributed to St. Cyril) charmingly says:

"Come and see God calling Mary 'My Mother' and kissing her mouth. . . . She used to take hold of His hand and lead Him along the roads, saying 'My sweet Son, walk a little way' in the same manner as all other babes are taught to walk. And He, Jesus, God Himself, followed meekly after her; He clung to her with His little fingers. He stopped from time to time and He hung on to the skirts of Mary His Mother—He on whom all creation hangs!"

He learnt His prayers at Mary's knee; He was taught to read and to write by her and Joseph. Like other boys He played games, He went on messages, He watched birds, He gathered flowers. He helped to shake olives, to mind sheep. In later life He often drew upon boyhood reminiscences. Themes such as these occur: little boys asking for bread and fish; the bird flying to her nest, the fox creeping to his hole; children's games; clothes which cannot be patched beyond a certain point; the depredations of moths and rust; the olive-oil lamp, the bushel, the oven; the price of birds; the buying of corn; the catching of fish; the farmer ploughing and seeding.

One can wander through Nazareth to-day, watching the youngsters and reconstructing the early life of Jesus. Whatever about the village, the landscape, or at least the general contour, has not changed. The fountain whence His mother fetched water is still there. Ascending the hill, about 450 feet above the village, one can have a view on which His eyes often gazed.



To the north Sepphoris, high hills and snowy Hermon; to the east the mountains of Golan beyond the Lake; to the west the chain of Carmel and the Mediterranean; to the south, the plain of Esdraelon and the mountains of Samaria, with rounded Thabor only a few miles away.

Amid these scenes, here in this hill-enclosed village, the Boy Jesus once lived. "He was regarded as the son of Joseph." He was "subject" to His parents. Joseph had the authority and the responsibility for the Holy Family. Not only Our Lady but Our Lord Himself accepted this social order, within which He led the normal happy life of a growing boy.

[Men found—and still find—it hard to realize that spiritual greatness was compatible with the completely human and ordinary life led by Our Lord. John the Baptist was essentially a Jewish saint, whose ascetical austerity was understood and admired by contemporaries. He was accepted as a prophet and was never subjected to the violent opposition which was offered to Jesus who "came eating and drinking."

St. Thérèse (in *Notre-Dame Fatale*): "The women of the countryside came to speak familiarly with the Blessed Virgin. Sometimes they asked her to let her little Jesus go and play with their children. . . . Everything in their life was just as it is in ours. And how many pains and disappointments! How many times people reproached good St. Joseph, how many times they refused to pay him for his work! Oh, how astonished we should be if we knew all they suffered!"

## 12

### Life in the Village

In meditating on the life of Our Lord, we must not pass too quickly over what we call His hidden life, ten times as long as His active mission. Not many are called to carry on His public ministry, only a handful to emulate His miracles, few to undergo His martyrdom. But all of us have the daily round of seemingly small tasks and petty drudgery. So we should not ask "Why this waste?" when we think of Nazareth. Rather let us rejoice at this humanisation of God among us. Jesus has by His own experience sanctified every phase of ordinary life, He consecrated our life by living it Himself.

It would be derogatory to Christ's full humanity to imagine that He did this merely to give us a lesson, that He, as-it-were, acted a part for our sakes. No. He required this long apprenticeship, this novitiate of training, for His future work. He equipped Himself with health and habits, with knowledge and experience, for His mission to His fellow-countrymen. After thirty years of preparation, the greatest Teacher the world has known set out from Nazareth. And in three years the course of human history was cleft in twain.

We should not picture Him, like a contemplative religious, in retreat from society, removed from the commerce of men. Nazareth was not far from important caravan routes. The important town of Sepphoris, about six miles to the north, was captured and burnt by the Romans shortly after His birth.

He must as a boy have seen its ruins; Joseph may have found work there when Antipas rebuilt it. When Jesus was about twelve, there was a revolt in Galilee. All around Him there was discussion of the central national-religious problem: how to avoid assimilation or annihilation. So, humanly speaking, He familiarized Himself with all the issues on which He later took a public stand.

For us our state of life is rarely subject to free choice; we do not select our parents, our home town, or even our religion. But Our Lord chose His Mother, His foster-father, His village, His upbringing. We sometimes forget the kind of life God chose for the Holy Family and in particular for His Mother. So far as we know, Our Lady's sanctity was not characterised by ecstatic prayer or miracle-working. It was exemplified by her work as mother and housekeeper. One can see even to-day the type of primitive house in which they lived, devoid of all modern conveniences. On the Sabbath, of course, Mary went to the synagogue and sat among the women behind the screen. She recited the prescribed psalms and prayers and taught them to her Son.

But most of her day was occupied in a lowly round of household tasks. She sallied forth to the market-place with her basket. She ground corn on a stone hand-mill and baked the bread for the family. She wore, mended and washed clothes. Twice a day she fetched water. To-day one might see a young wife, with a water-jar poised on her head and leading her little son by the hand, going to the spring now known as the Virgin's Fountain. With a shock, the onlooker whispers to himself; just like Mary with Jesus.

In some ways art has distorted our vision. For example, the *Expousals* depicted by Raphael with Renaissance splendour. Doubtless art is justified in transporting to earth the royal

grandeur of heaven. But we must remember that on earth Our Lady was just like one of the women we can meet in Nazareth. She was what her favourites—such as St. Catherine Labouré or St. Bernadette—are in our time. Only in heaven is she queen, and her children princesses.

It is by meditating on Nazareth that we grasp the full implications of the incarnation. God once lived in this village. He had an address like you or me: say, 17 Fountain Street, Nazareth. He lived with His parents, He grew up into manhood, externally no different from the other boys and men. His foster-father was a carpenter, His Mother a working woman. How near to us came God!

[A rabbinic writing (the Mishnah) gives us a summary of the tasks of a Jewish housewife: "grinding corn, baking bread, washing clothes, cooking, suckling her child, working in wool." Our Lady, like other women in Nazareth, may have grown vegetables and kept fowl; and on occasions she may have marketed them at Sepphoris, more than an hour's journey to the north. It is helpful and consoling for us to meditate on Mary's earthly life of humble toil.

St. Thérèse (in *Notre-Dame Parle*): "We can well understand that her real life at Nazareth and during the subsequent years must have been quite ordinary. . . . Instead of showing the blessed Virgin as all but inaccessible, we should hold her up as possible of imitation while practising the hidden virtues and living by faith just like us." ]

## 13

### Lost and Found

Luke 2, 40-51.

Only one recorded event breaks for us the long silence of the hidden life in Nazareth. While unexpected and mysterious, the incident is free from later legendary details. Though Galileans were not bound, Joseph and Mary used to go every year to Jerusalem at least for the festival of Passover. They took Jesus with them when He was twelve years old, a year before He became "a son of the Law." It was probably His first visit to the Temple, the only place in the world where the true God was properly adored. Our Lord, being a fully normal youth, must have been thrilled to see the city and the Temple. And we must not imagine Him being led around by the hand; for a boy is more precociously developed in the East than with us.

After the joyous celebrations, Joseph and Mary rejoined the Nazareth caravan and started for home. "But, unknown to His parents, the Boy Jesus remained in Jerusalem." At the outset His parents felt no anxiety, believing that, like other youths, He was somewhere in the caravan. It is clear that Jesus was allowed freedom; He mixed with those of His own age and was on terms of affection with their kinsfolk. But when, at the evening halt, His parents were unable to find Him, they became alarmed and began an anxious but fruitless search for Him among the pilgrims. Next day they returned to Jerusalem, looking for Him along the route and then in

the city. It was a sad ending to the joyful festival. They had lost Jesus; He was nowhere to be found; He might have been kidnapped by Egyptian merchants. There was no message from Him; no angel appeared to Joseph to guide him.

Next morning they repaired to the Temple and walked along under the colonnades where the rabbis were teaching. Suddenly they stood still, entranced. There was Jesus! "He was sitting among the rabbis, listening to them and also asking them questions." There was no forwardness in this, no usurping the function of a teacher. But by "the intelligence of His answers," He was singled out as an exceptional pupil. Clearly He had been well taught by Mary and Joseph, thus to merit what we might call a certificate of religious instruction and scriptural knowledge.

Finally Joseph attracted the Boy's attention and drew Him aside. "And His Mother said to Him: Son, why have You treated us thus? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for You." Undoubtedly a gentle reproach, put calmly with exquisite tact. It is Mary who spoke; but she associated Joseph with herself not only in searching but in grieving. She did not ask: Why were You lost? Or: What happened to You? She knew that He had not acted thoughtlessly, that He had not simply forgotten to inform His parents. His unexpected action must have been deliberate. He knew, as even an ordinary child would know, that He was causing grief and anxiety to His parents. So even Our Lady was not exempted from desolation and sorrow.

His answer was mysterious: "Why is it that ye have been searching for Me? Did ye not know that I have to be at My Father's?"<sup>1</sup> He assumed that they should have known, perhaps

<sup>1</sup> This has been interpreted in two ways - (1) in My Father's house; (2) engaged in My Father's business.

from what He had previously told them. And He gently reminded them that His real Father was God.

If the incident were not recorded by St. Luke, we should flatly refuse to believe that it ever took place. It seems so alien to the perfect obedience He displayed before and after. The only adequate, but partial, explanation is that Jesus was both God and Man; if either is denied, it remains quite unintelligible. It throws light on His human formation. Already He was actively preparing Himself for His future mission. Yet this act of divine independence did not imply a premature separation. Without the least reluctance He went back home, to live for many years in obedience and dependence.

But no merely human child would have the right to plunge his parents in unnecessary sorrow. Jesus was not only the Son of Mary, He was the Son of God; and His first recorded words refer to "My Father." His divine mission was revealed, and then voluntarily postponed. Even Mary, who "treasured the incident in her memory," only gradually progressed in her realization of the import of the Incarnation. His parents saw, without fully comprehending, that Jesus had reasons of His own for effecting this temporary but painful separation.

And, without unduly forcing a lesson, we may see in this incident an illustration of the principle that even parental rights must give way before God's call to a child.

## The Carpenter

There is—or used to be—an old-fashioned carpenter in Nazareth, whom one could see squatting on the ground at his work under immemorably ancient conditions. The workshop, separate from the dwelling-house, was a small, flat-roofed room lighted only from the street. It was a living picture of St. Joseph.

In such a village a carpenter could not have been too specialized. In addition to woodworking—making little wooden ploughs, roof-beams, doors, boxes, etc.—he probably assisted in house-building. In the East the local craftsman also usually owns or rents a small plot of ground.

He was not only a manual worker, he was also a small master-man and a shopkeeper. He executed orders with his own hands and in slack times manufactured a stock of ready-made goods. He had to go around to buy wood and to transport it on his donkey. Sometimes he had to go far afield for work, e.g. on a building project, or down to the Lake to solicit customers among the fishermen. He collected payment, often in kind, e.g. wheat to be ground by Mary. It was not an idyllic life of heavenly leisure. There was no grinding poverty, but also there were no luxuries.

Joseph therefore had a responsible, busy life, lightened neither by angelic visitants nor by miraculous interventions. As he grew older, he took his foster-son as an apprentice.



He taught Jesus his trade. He employed Him as an assistant, and then a junior partner, in the business: Joseph and Son, Carpenters.

Before Our Lord began His public life, probably for several years previously, Joseph was dead. He died in the presence of Jesus and Mary; and so he has been chosen as the patron of a happy death.

Our Lord then carried on the trade, supporting Himself and His widowed mother. The Nazarenes called Him "Mary's Son, the Carpenter." St. Justin says He made ploughs and yokes. The pagan Celas made a cruel jibe: Jesus, being a carpenter, was naturally nailed to the wood.

Our Lord therefore earned His living as a craftsman working with His hands. He also purchased materials from merchants, dealt with the accounts, financed and planned His little enterprise. It is astonishing that by far the greater part of His life-span was thus spent. The public or "sensational" portion was very short.

We must not confuse first-century Palestine with the modern world of specialisation and proletarianism. Our Lord's manual work remained human; it was not mechanised or dehumanised. It was—as is confirmed by the example of several rabbis—conjoined with leisure and religious culture. We can imagine the Holy Family taking an outing, and we find them travelling on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He knew Capernaum and the Lake district and its fishing prior to His public life. He relied on human means for acquiring the intimate knowledge which He afterwards displayed in His ministry, and indeed when He was only twelve years old. As we often overlook the historical context of His problems and pronouncements, we fail to realise that He emerged from Nazareth with a lucid grasp of the serious issues facing His countrymen.

The Carpenter of Nazareth has shown us how even a manual worker can lead a life of religion and real culture. The lesson is enshrined for us in Joyce Kilmer's lines:

*O Carpenter of Nazareth,  
 Whose Mother was a village maid,  
 Shall we, Thy children, blow our breath,  
 In vain on any humble trade?  
 Have pity on our foolishness,  
 And give us eyes that we may see,  
 Beneath the workman's humble dress,  
 The splendour of humanity.*

[There have been some spiritual writers who denied that Christ was a carpenter, though He was called so in derision. For instance: St. Simon of Cascia (†1348) and Denis the Carthusian (†1471). They could not accept the idea of God being a manual labourer. Christ, they thought, lived as a contemplative, supported by His parents. Even some holy people to-day have this tendency to dehumanise and ecclesiasticise Our Lord.

"We seem to think of Our Lord exclusively in connection with church, prayer and worship, and to visualise Him at all times as the painter of religious pictures and the makers of highly-coloured plaster-of-Paris statues represent Him. But the truth is that Jesus was a man, a manly man, one who lived a human life similar to that of His contemporaries."—Dom E. Graf, *In Christ's Own Country*.]

## 15

### Return to the Home Town

Mat. 13. 54-58. Mark 6. 1-6.

Luke 4. 16-30.

At the outset of His public life, Our Lord moved, with some at least of His relatives, down to the larger town of Capernaum on the Lake, as it was a better centre for His ministry. Later He returned to Nazareth on a visit to His childhood home. On the Sabbath He attended the service in the synagogue. The Scriptural lessons could be read by any competent person permitted or invited by the warden.

Our Lord was handed the scroll or sheet containing the book of Isaiah; it was rolled up like a map. He opened it and read a passage which was probably part of the lesson for the day. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," wrote the prophet, who claimed to be sent to announce glad news for the poor, release for captives, sight for the blind (probably in a spiritual sense). Handing back the roll, Jesus sat down and began His exposition, of which we are given only a very condensed summary.

"The text ye have just heard," He said, "has now been brought to fulfilment." He claimed that it was of Him that Isaiah prophetically spoke, and His listeners were the people to whom the prophet referred. St. Matthew and St. Mark tell us that His hearers were astonished (or taken aback). St. Luke seems to say that they bore witness to Him and wondered at His words of grace. But the meaning seems to be rather this: They bore witness (or complaint) against Him.

and noticed that He spoke only of grace, omitting the prophet's reference to the overthrow of Israel's enemies. Jesus implied that they were the poor in spirit to be evangelised, the sin-imprisoned to be freed, the soul-blinded without vision. But they did not so regard themselves, and they resented His sermon.

A divinely sent prophet indeed! Many had known Him as a child, as a young carpenter from whom they had bought yokes and ploughs. He was just one of themselves. Jesus replied: "No prophet is welcomed in his native place." They retorted that He had treated them badly. "Do here in Your own town all that we have heard You did in Capharnaum." This rivalry was very human. But uncompromisingly Christ rejected this claim to favouritism on the part of His relatives and fellow-villagers.

It was God's will, He declared, that Elias helped not any widow in Israel but only a Canaanite widow; and Elisha cured no Jewish leper but only Naaman, a Syrian. The inference was obvious: it was not God's will to do among them what He did in Capharnaum. But what made His hearers angry was the implication that pagans would be worthier recipients of miracles.

Some years later, St. Paul, in his address to the Jewish crowd in the Temple, came to mention His mission to the Gentiles (Acts 22, 21). Immediately there was such an uproar—shouting, throwing dust into the air, threats of violence—that Roman soldiers had to rescue the Apostle. The reaction to Jesus in Nazareth was not quite so tumultuary. But the gathering broke up and a number headed Him off, intending to throw Him down a cliff in the village. Probably without a miracle, His calm dignity began to overcome them and they finally slunk away.

Sack was His reception in the village where He had lived as boy and man. He went away, never again to set foot in Nazareth. "Wondering at their lack of faith, He went on a teaching tour through the neighbouring villages."

"Isn't this fellow Joseph's son?" They were shocked at the idea of being taught by a local tradesman, they couldn't accept the idea that He had a superior spiritual status. So to-day many try to reduce Him to being an ordinary first-century Jew. But to us His real humanity, His having lived as a dutiful son and as a working carpenter, brings God nearer to us.

[Owing to one sentence in St. Luke (4. 22), many commentators think that he combined two visits of Christ to Nazareth, on the first of which He was favourably received. But it is unnecessary to attribute this clumsy procedure to the evangelist. The sentence may be interpreted: "They all bore witness to (against) Him; and they wondered (were taken aback) at the words of grace." The "witness" need not be taken as favourable; in Jewish law to witness was to accuse. And His hearers resented the message of grace, i.e. forgiveness for them, while Christ omitted the words of Isaiah about vengeance on Israel's enemies.]

## 16

# The Baptist's Advice

Luke 3, 10-14.

From Jordan's bank John shouted this message: Repent, be converted! None was exempted. He was severe on the professional exponents of religion, comparing them to snakes wriggling away from the judgment flames.

Like Amos or Jeremiah, he demolished the Jews' self-confidence, pride of descent, religious monopoly. If God wanted children of Abraham, He could make countless such out of the stones lying around. What God demanded was complete reformation signified by immersion in the Jordan.

After such thunder, one would expect that ordinary sinful people, coming to be baptised, would be ordered to abandon property and profession, to become ascetics and hermits. Not at all.

They asked him: What are we to do? He did not say: Give your garments to the poor and go round half-naked, eat nothing but locusts and wild honey. He said: If you have clothes and food to spare, share with those in need.

Well on into the nineteenth century, under Turkish rule, the most hated and dishonest classes in Palestine were the tax-collectors and the armed police. These, too, came to John. He did not tell the customs and excise men to abandon their profession, as the Pharisees would have done; he merely told them to give up extortion and to keep to the tariff. To

the gendarmes who helped to exact taxes he said: Do not use violence, make no false accusations, live on your pay.

In the questions put to John we can discern signs of political and social unrest. But he resolutely refused to countenance revolutionary action or militant nationalism. On the other hand, he refrained from advocating abandonment of the world, eremitical asceticism such as he himself practised. Personal repentance, messianic faith, spiritualisation of life. Yes. But this inner conversion was to be outwardly manifested in ordinary duties, justice, honesty, charity, social service.

John was in this a forerunner of Christianity. After Peter's Pentecost sermon, the thousands present asked him: What are we to do? Peter told them to have a change of heart and mind, to be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ, thus to obtain pardon for their sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And we see from the Acts of the Apostles, from St. Paul, from the early Church, how these first Christians conquered that hard pagan world by bringing God into daily life; by fulfilling the duties of their state as parents, workers or employers; by practical charity and organised social service.

We, too, need this lesson. Religion does not supersede natural virtues, it inspires and vitalises them. Holiness does not consist in feelings, visions or ecstasies; it does not demand withdrawal from daily tasks.

[“Whoever fails to provide for his own dependents, and especially for the members of his family, has thereby disowned the faith, indeed he is worse than an unbeliever.”—St. Paul, 1 Tim. 5. 8.

“If a man will not work, he is not to be given food.”—St. Paul, 2 Thess. 3. 10.]

## The Great Decision

Matthew 4, 1-13. Mark 1, 12-13.

Luke 4, 1-13.

To His first disciples Our Lord recounted a unique story: a piece of autobiography, we might say. Clearly He told it as part of the training of His first close followers; it must contain a lesson they could grasp, though it is not easy for us of to-day to see the significance of Our Lord's "temptations." The earliest patristic interpretation—the exploration of Jesus' status by the devil—seems much more apposite than the subsequent homiletic and practical application to the sins of gluttony, vain-glory and ambition. It is recognised to-day that the story is not concerned with temptations against Christ's personal virtues, but with objections against His messianic policy. The verb "to tempt," in the Old and New Testaments, usually means to put God to the test, to impose human conditions on God's action. It is under the heading of such "temptations" that, at the outset of His career, Our Lord graphically explained the false views of His mission that He proposed to reject.

The scenery or framework, adapted to the Oriental cast of thought, need not be taken literally. We need not assume that Satan appeared in human guise, no more than he did to Job; nor need we suppose that Jesus was physically transported. This parabolic structure must not distract us from understanding, by means of a threefold contrast, the principle of Our Lord's public ministry.



(1) He is to lead a human life, subject to all disabilities and sufferings. When hungry He would refuse to provide Himself with food miraculously. How could He inculcate the duty of labouring for one's daily bread, if at a word stones were turned into loaves? The hunger He felt was the epitome of the need and the suffering felt by all the children of men. He would not intervene to exempt Himself from the common lot of humanity, no more than God does for us. He always emphasised the spiritual purpose of His miracles, even in the case of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. When you hear that Christianity has failed to increase material prosperity, remember that this is but echoing the old temptation. Christ did not come to establish the era of messianic plenty expected by the Jews. The Church is not a welfare bureau.

(2) The second scene depicts Our Lord standing on the parapet of the Temple colonnade, looking down on the crowded courts below. Why not convince them of His claims by a sensational prodigy of levitation? Why not give them "a sign from heaven"? It would seem to be a grand, easy way without labour or cross. No. He would not employ physical force, moral compulsion, appeal by stunts. He chose the slow, uphill work of interior training, gradually purifying the popular idea of the Messiah, slowly revealing His identity. This temptation was echoed on Calvary: "Come down from the cross." So to-day the faith is to be propagated by witness, not by shock tactics or crowd appeal. There is a danger that the contemporary apostolate may be menaced by modern techniques such as those adopted by totalitarian States.

(3) In the third incident Our Lord is pictured as standing on a great height and surveying the kingdoms of the earth, and having presented to Him the grandiose conception of a world-conquest. Though He branded this idea as insane—for it

involved the total corruption of His spiritual universalist message—yet in fact it was the current Jewish view of the function of the Messianic: expulsion of the Romans from Palestine, subjugation of the Gentiles to the chosen people. Humanly speaking, it was Our Lord's most original and most difficult task to convince His followers of His ideal of an exclusively spiritual and universalist kingdom. Even Peter acted as "Satan" when he deprecated Christ's suffering and death, the crown without the cross. Even to the end the Apostles confused earthly and political features with His kingdom. And He failed to induce the majority of His race to dissociate religion and nationalism. But, discarding force and racial bonds, as He here decided at the outset of His ministry, He did succeed in founding a world-wide spiritual kingdom.

"The temptations of Our Lord," says Monsignor Knox, "are the temptations of His Church." His followers did not always succeed in avoiding alien aims in propagating and defending religion. And to-day, with the growth of totalitarianism, there is the temptation of promising success to the Church on condition of hitching her star to the wagon of State. "Begone, Satan," was Our Lord's reply.

[Looking at the Temptations in this way, we avoid any necessity of artificially construing the proposed actions into personal sins. And we obtain a graphical sketch of the policy which Our Lord adopted from the start of His public ministry. Thus interpreted, the account fits into the context and into the plan of the Gospels.]

## Come and See

John 1. 15-18.

ST. JOHN tells us of the first tentative adhesion of a few friends and himself. To read of this humble inauguration of the vast society founded by Christ is like watching the small beginnings of a mighty river.

It started with an apparently trivial incident: three men talking near the Jordan and another passing by. The Baptist looked at Jesus and pointed Him out to two of his disciples with the mysterious words: "There is God's Lamb who is to take away the world's sin."

It was probably the Baptist's last look at Christ on earth, and the pair's first sight of Him who was to change their lives. Andrew and the unnamed one (who was surely John) went after the retreating Figure.

They were taking their first steps on a world-shaking adventure, the physical prelude of a wonderful soul-following. As most of us do, they followed because of what they heard another say. We are Christians to-day because we were taught by others, and these in their turn had teachers who ultimately go back to these Apostles.

Hearing the footsteps of the two, Our Lord turned round and asked them: "For what are ye looking?" It was really a searching question for which they were not prepared, for they hardly knew their own mind. But they knew that their dimly-felt quest was for Someone, not for something. They did not

openly express this. They merely asked: "Rabbi, where are You staying?" "Come and see," He replied.

It was well for them that they accepted the invitation; it was the beginning of a lifelong association. We have no record of the conversation. We only know that by morning they were prepared to say: We have found the Messiah.

Enthusiast with the good news, Andrew rushed off to find his brother Simon, who was not so easily won over. So Andrew "brought him to Jesus." Peter was Andrew's convert; perhaps no great a service to the Church as ever any man performed.

Andrew next unsuccessfully tried to win Philip, his friend and fellow-townsmen. So perhaps it was at Andrew's request that Jesus went to find Philip.

Christ's presence did more than Andrew's arguments. Philip then met Nathanael, whose objections he was unable to answer. Taught by his own experience, he simply said: "Come and see."

So they came, they saw, and they were conquered. It was not such an easy conversion. Andrew, John, Simon and Philip had to break the links which bound them to the Baptist; Nathanael had to overcome prejudices and scriptural difficulties.

They all had to begin a fresh career fraught with uncertainty and sacrifice; in the course of a three years' discipleship they had to acquire a new religious orientation. And their vocation seemed to start so casually. No ecstasy, no heavenly voice.

A chance encounter, a conversation, the invitation of a friend: these were the human causes which brought them to Jesus. And their resultant faith was something more than intellectual assent or book-learning.

In our lives too God speaks to us through apparently chance circumstances. And we learn more about Christ on our knees

than in the study chair. To us also He issues the invitation: Come and see.

[Current expositions do not seem to give sufficient credit to John the Baptist for his co-operation with Jesus. We cannot infer from Luke 3, 1 that John began his mission a few months before Christ. The fame of the desert-preacher must have been growing for some years, preparing the way for the Messiah. The first Apostles—and probably many more of Christ's disciples—had been followers of the Baptist. John generously supplied them. He rose above all petty jealousy, he accepted his subordinate function. "He must increase, and I must decrease." What a lesson for us Christians!

So we must not imagine that the Baptist's mission was violently terminated shortly after he had begun. He must have been for a considerable time a public figure to have acquired such influence as to attract crowds to the Jordan, to disturb the metropolitan religious leaders, and to frighten Herod Antipas. The religious revival he produced was a real contribution to the work of Jesus, who took up John's message and adopted his rite. John acted also as "master of novices," training subjects for Our Lord.]

## 19

# A Wedding in Galilee

John 2. 1-11.

Our Lord began His ministry by selecting half a dozen disciples. When a friend of His was married in Cana, a village not far from Nazareth, the disciples were invited with Him to the festivity. It is in the simple human context of a wedding-party that Jesus began His work. It is the only glimpse the Gospels give us of the adult Jesus and His Mother fulfilling ordinary social obligations and amenities among friends and kindfolk. This scene of homely merry-making under a jovial master of ceremonies helps us to differentiate Christ from His sternly ascetic Forerunner. He who came to teach us the way of the cross did not dissociate Himself from the ordinary life of simple folk. He who exalted virginity showed that He did not deprecate marriage.

During the festivities which lasted a week, the wine began to run short, though the guests did not know it. But Mary knew. She was not sitting with the men, for women dined in a separate room. It seems clear that she was actively engaged in helping and in preparing the food. The bride or bridegroom, if not both, was probably a relative or close friend. Naturally anxious to avoid embarrassment for her friends, she came to her Son and whispered: "There is no more wine." It was a simple statement of fact, but it implied a gentle request for help. There is no suggestion that she expected a miracle. But

her recourse to Jesus is a touching indication that she readily turned to Him in difficulties and had come to place complete reliance on Him.

So far the story is simple and natural. Our Lady, who had some responsibility for the supplies, told her Son of the impending shortage, which indeed may have been due to the unexpected arrival of Him and His companions. But now comes Our Lord's enigmatic answer, which, with barbarous but impartial literalness, the Rheims version of 1582 thus reproduces: "What is to Me and thee, woman?" Commentators have been disputing about the meaning of the phrase. But the best interpreter is Our Lady herself, who clearly took the reply to be the prelude to intervention. So we can take Jesus' rejoinder as an intimation that she is wrong to be worried, He is quite aware of the situation and does not need her prompting. "Mother," why do you tell Me that? Has not My hour come?"<sup>1</sup>

When Jesus answered, did Mary retire, silenced and rebuked? Did she silently ponder over the saying in her heart, as she is known to have done on other occasions? Did she make a further plea? Did she act as if her request had been refused? No. "His Mother said to the waiters; Be sure to do whatever He may tell you." Obviously the conversation is not fully reported. Christ must have told Mary that He needed the co-operation of the servers. Ordinarily they would take their instructions from the chairman. But Our Lady, who was in a position of authority, ensured that the waiters were ready to carry out any order of Jesus, however futile it might seem. Can we not generalise and say that Mary says to all her clients: Do whatever Jesus tells you?

<sup>1</sup> In Greek there is nothing derogatory in addressing a person as "woman," it could be used even towards a queen. But serious scholars have held that what Our Lord really said to Ananias was "My Mother."

<sup>2</sup> That is, the time for His manifestation as Messiah. More usually, the "hour" is referred to His death; and the sentence is read: "My hour has not yet come."

Outside in the court there were six large stone jars for ritual ablutions. Commanded by Jesus, the waiters filled these jars with water. These waiters were not hired servants, but friendly volunteers; the story seems to imply that they were really the disciples He had brought with Him. This jar-filling seemed to them a curious task; but His Mother had told them to do whatever He said. Their faith was tried even more severely when they were told to draw the liquid into flagons and to take it to the chairman as if it were new-broached wine. They must have thought it was a practical joke!

In rapidation they presented the liquid to the chairman. To their amazement it proved to be excellent wine, thus supplied almost by stealth, with the connivance of only the servers. There was no publicity; even the serving disciples knew of the stupendous miracle only from the jocular remark of the half-tipsy chairman. How unexpected and unobtrusive was Our Lord's method of intervention, which He designed to strengthen the faith of His new-found disciples.

In the light of our greater knowledge, we can, without artifice, read deeper lessons into this scene of a country wedding: The perfect humanity and naturalness of Our Lord, His participation in ordinary life; the efficacious intercession of Our Lady and her advice to Jesus' followers; the power of Christ over nature. Even the chairman's chaffing of the bridegroom—"You have kept the good wine until now"—has a spiritual application unknown to the speaker.

[Tradition and art regarded Cass as prefiguring the Eucharist. St. Cyril of Jerusalem: "He once turned water into wine . . . And is it impossible that He should have turned wine into blood?"]



## The Big Catch

Mat. 4, 18-22. Mark 1, 16-20.

Luke 5, 1-11.

WALKING along the shore one morning, Our Lord was besieged by a crowd. It was not easy to find an elevation near the level beach, so He decided to address an open-air meeting from a boat.

There were two boats moored nearby; the fishermen were clearing their nets after an unsuccessful night's fishing. He asked Simon for the use of his boat. Simon Peter, though he was tired and hungry and anxious to go home, pulled the vessel out a little way to serve as a rostrum.

An appealing scene in the happy idyllic days of His early Galilean work; Christ sitting in the boat—not standing as many painters have depicted—and the people, in the morning sunlight, clustering on the sloping shore. He took natural means to make His sermon audible and effective.

When He had finished speaking, He turned to Simon and said: "Push off into deep water and get your men to lower the net for a haul."

It was now mid-day, a most unsuitable time for fishing. Peter, an expert fisherman, did not take kindly to what he considered amateur advice; Jesus might know about carpentry, of course! Peter was anxious to eat and sleep, very unwilling

to embark on a futile trip. As always, he was outspoken. "Master," he replied, "we were working hard all night but caught nothing."

Then, seeing the look of Jesus, he added with impulsive trust: "Still, as You tell me to do so, I will have the net let down again." Our Lord did not promise success to Peter; He merely told him to try again—this time with His blessing. He meant to inculcate a lesson for the spiritual life as well as for the apostolate. His disciples must be trained in docility to His commands, and also in hope, so as to undertake the seemingly useless or impossible.

They pulled out into deeper water, Jesus in Simon's boat. The dinghy took off one end of the triple net with floats, then it brought the end back to the boat. What a catch they enclosed! At first the marvellous nature of the haul did not strike Peter; a true fisherman, he was absorbed in his job.

Unable to lift the unexpected load, he signalled for help to his business partners in the other boat. For Peter was in a co-operative society (at least for marketing) with James and John. Christ selected men who had been trained to work together and had organising ability.

Only when the enormous draught of fish had been saved did the full implication strike Peter. Falling at Jesus' knees, he exclaimed: "Lord, go away from me, for I am a sinful man." Who could ever have invented such an extraordinary request? Yet it was characteristic of Peter, who lacked duplicity or reticence, who tended to be mastered by the emotion of the moment. He felt an overwhelming sense of sin and unworthiness, a sudden realisation of Christ's spiritual eminence.

But Our Lord did not go away, or rather He took Peter away with Him. "Have no fear," He said. "From now on you will be catching men."

It is thus obvious that the incident was primarily a miracle of instruction, an acted parable. Simon was not to change his trade, but only its object; he was to become a *fisher of men*, to catch them for Jesus, and under His direction.

Peter did not then foresee that his first cast as apostolic fisher would net three thousand. And, though to a lesser extent, we are all called to be *fishers of souls*; we cannot renage on the plea of being sinners. Our influence on our fellows will either bring them nearer to God or drive them away.

[The first adhesion of some men (see No. 18) was for some weeks; it was a kind of probation, an intermittent association such as they formerly had with the Baptist. They then went back to carry on their trade of fishing. By now Our Lord had made arrangements, including provision for support, for a permanent band of itinerant companions. So they were invited to throw in their lot with Him. Peter already knew Jesus, he had religious respect for the "Master," he would not have taken the order from anyone else. So now they left their boats and fishing gear to become full-time disciples and preachers. It was a momentous decision which has influenced all subsequent history. Had they kept to their occupation, who would ever have heard of Simon and the others?]

## 21

# Go and tell John

Matthew 11. 2-11.      Luke 7. 18-19.

JOHN THE BAPTIST was kept in custody by Herod Antipas, who was embarrassed to know what to do with the fiery preacher. The rugged son of the desert, forced into inactivity in his lonely dungeon, suffered from depression and discouragement. His abruptly ended mission seemed a failure. Perhaps he thought that Jesus might rescue him from prison. Above all, he was impatient for the great dénouement he had been proclaiming. He thought of respectfully suggesting that Jesus should hurry up and make a glorious manifestation, that He should now wield the winnowing-shovel, even the axe.

Some of John's disciples reported to him that Jesus was engaged in teaching and in performing miracles of beneficence in Galilee. He was perplexed. He resolved to send two of his disciples straight to Jesus to put directly to Him the query: "Art Thou the One who is to come or are we to wait for some other?" The very sending of the message shows his deep faith in Our Lord. It is morally and psychologically incredible that he doubted whether Jesus was the Messiah. But he had a preconceived idea of the messianic mission, which he found it hard to reconcile with the activities chosen by Jesus. Perhaps it would be left to another figure—The Prophet—to inaugurate catastrophically the Kingdom of God?

It is consoling to learn that there were in John human

limitations such as are to be found in the greatest minds. There were some inaccuracies in his religious ideal, Jesus' mission was not quite what he had expected, he felt the irksomeness of prison, he experienced loneliness and depression. He did what we too should do on a like occasion: he put his difficulty to Jesus and awaited His decision.

A somewhat similar difficulty troubles many in our own age. Is Christ the final revelation of God to man? Or are we still waiting for some other? Are men to look to messianic Marxism to usher in the earthly millennium?

Surely John, if anyone, deserved a straight answer. Yet he was given a reply, at once reticent and revealing, in accordance with Our Lord's policy of avoiding entanglement in religious nationalism. He did not explicitly say: I am the Prophet and the Messiah. For it was not His task to restore the kingdom to Israel in the sense expected by the bystanders, and perhaps even by John. He kept the envoys with Him while He was teaching and working miracles. "Go back," He told them, "and tell John what ye have seen and heard." Then He made an allusion to the prophecy of Isaiah. He added: "Blessed is the man to whom I am not a stumbling-block." This last phrase is undoubtedly a gentle reproof to John, such as Christ has often given to His saints down the ages. John was to trust Jesus and accept His mode of action; his own mission was now to suffer in prison. As we would say to-day, John had to continue to bear the cross.

Only when the envoys were going away, did Our Lord make a wonderful public eulogy of His Forerunner:

"What did ye go into the wilderness to see? Not a wind-tossed reed! Well, what did ye go to see? An elegantly dressed man? But men who are fashionably dressed and fare luxuriously live in palaces. Well, then,

why did ye go out there? To see a prophet? Yes, and more than a prophet?"

This was Our Lord's vindication of His imprisoned friend's sanctity and loyalty. But He proceeded to make clear that John's mission was preparatory and subordinate to His own: "This is he of whom it is written; I am sending ahead of you a messenger to prepare the road for you to travel." This was a tremendous claim. Our Lord regarded His own work as the culmination of the Jewish religion, as utterly different in kind from the progressive growth of man's insight. For His panegyric of John closes with a singular saying: "The least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he." To us a very surprising judgement. The situation is not to John's personal sanctity but to his office; he was a herald, we are citizens. How objective, inclusive and social was Our Lord's conception of the Kingdom, of the era of grace inaugurated by the Incarnation. It is an awe-inspiring thought that we are transformed and elevated into a sacramental society, at whose threshold stood John, the last of the Old Testament prophets.

[Some points: (1) John was despondent, chafing under inactivity, perhaps expecting to be liberated. (2) He was puzzled by Jesus' method, so tame and gradual. He had been expecting a divine discomfitment. How human and even limited was the great Forerunner! (3) He took the proper remedy; he sent envoys to Jesus Himself. (4) Our Lord gently but firmly corrected John's expectations. (5) He left John to be purified by suffering but conveyed encouragement to him by the assurance pronounced as the messengers were going away.]

## 22

### Interview with a Rabbi

John 3 1-31.

Nicodemus, a leading member of the Sanhedrin, was the first Jewish theologian to adopt a friendly attitude towards Jesus. He was cautious, he was not ready to commit himself, he did not wish to be seen openly consorting with Jesus.

So he arranged for a private interview by night. We must not be hard on Nicodemus. He had all the prejudices of his upbringing, his associates, his formed outlook on life. After all, he did come to Christ, he approached Him with respect, he admitted that this Galilean Carpenter had a divinely approved title to teach. So near and yet so far.

Had Our Lord been an ordinary human revivalist, He would have felt flattered, He would surely have stretched His principles to accommodate such a distinguished visitor. But Nicodemus must have felt deflated by his reception, just as to-day would-be converts are often disappointed when, on first approaching a priest, they are so calmly received. At the back of their minds they are expecting to be fused over; sometimes they feel slightly patronising and condescending towards the Church which they propose to join.

So Nicodemus found to his surprise that he had not the status of one making a contribution or conferring a favour. He had to become a little child, he had even to be born again.

He came expecting that a brief conversation would give him a complete grasp of the new message. Being an intellectual, he thought that religion was something to be investigated from the outside; all that was needed was information, study and research. He had all the other prerequisites: descent from Abraham, circumcision, observance of the Law. So why should he have to be baptised and to be reborn? He wanted to discuss academic matters; but Christ wanted him to acquire a sense of sin.

How can a man be born again when he is grown up? All right perhaps for a proselyte or for a Galilean peasant; but not for a Jerusalem graduate, whose mind is formed, who has acquired his own philosophy of life, who has studied religion. What is all this talk of a rustling in the heart stirred by the Spirit?

A good, honest man, well-educated, was Nicodemus; but dense to deeper spiritual realities. So he who had come of his own accord to make overtures left without making the great surrender.

Certainly not the kind of man that Christ sought for His mission. At least Nicodemus was not then wanted, to be as it were a founder-member. But let us hope that the seeds sown in this interview germinated later.

We get two further glimpses of him. Once when he stood up to defend Christ at a meeting of the Sanhedrin. And at the end when, the Apostles having fled, he openly joined Joseph to give Our Lord honourable burial.



## What more should I Do ?

Mat. 19, 16-22. Mark 10, 17-22.

Luke 18, 18-23.

WHEN Our Lord was one day starting off on a journey, He was stopped by a shout. A young man—he might have been any age from twenty to forty—came running up and knelt before Him. What extraordinary fervour and urgency! "Good Master," he cried, "what must I do to gain eternal life?"

This youth was the first of a great multitude who down the centuries have come to Christ, seeking an answer to that momentous question which confronts mankind. Christ replied: "Keep the Commandments."

This terse answer is a salutary corrective of religious sentimentalism which may be tempted to by-pass the moral law which binds everyone. First things first.

The young man was not satisfied. "I have been keeping all these since I was a boy," he said. "What else am I to do?" He was not content with the obligatory minimum; he wanted to do something positive, voluntary, extra.

Then comes that wonderful phrase: "Jesus looked at him and loved him." How Our Lord appreciated that extra touch, that readiness to do more than is necessary! He loved him—the original phrase may even mean: He kissed him. And the look of Jesus—the look that first drew His disciples, the look

that made Peter burst into tears. It is hard ever to forget the look of Jesus : did this young man?

"One thing remains for you to do," said Christ. "If you want to be perfect, go and sell everything you have, distributing the proceeds to the poor, for which you will acquire riches in heaven. Then come back and follow Me."

St. Anthony in the fourth century, St. Francis in the thirteenth, countless thousands down the years, have taken these words literally and accepted the invitation.

But this man became very sad at the prospect of such sacrifice; and he went away; for he was very rich. Our Lord failed to obtain a disciple whom He invited. The young man was allowed to go; no further explanation, persuasion or threats; he was not called back.

We must not, of course, assume that he was damned. But he decided to live on a lower plane than God wished. He missed his chance; we do not know if he ever got another.

Not all of us are called to give up everything. Jesus also "loved" Lazarus and his two sisters; He did not invite them to share His poverty; He availed of their hospitality.

But we all have to abandon something to follow Jesus; above all, we must positively dedicate what we have to His service. It will not always be material riches; it may be intellectual gifts, leisure, personal service, the opportunities of one's position, perfection in ordinary duties.

We often have a feeling that we are not doing all that God expects from us; that little bit extra is missing from our lives. If I have this urge, I know that Jesus looks on me and loves me. I must not disappoint Him.

## 24

# A Storm on the Lake

Mat. 8, 23-27. Mark 4, 35-40.

Luke 8, 22-25.

*AFTER teaching for hours from a boat as pulpit, Our Lord was tired; He wished to escape for a while from the crowds lining the beach.*

So, late in the afternoon, He invited His disciples on board and told them to cross over to the opposite (eastern) shore. Perhaps the weather-wise fishermen warned Him of an impending storm, such as can come suddenly down on the low-lying Lake of Galilee; for afterwards they seemed to blame Him for bringing them into danger.

They set out. Soon, however, the little fishing smack was heaving and tossing in a sudden squall. The disciples were working hard to keep the boat afloat. But Jesus was asleep in the little open cabin in the stern, resting on a leather cushion. The most consoling aspect of this incident is not ridiculous at all, it is poignantly human. He was worn out, so fatigued that He remained fast asleep even when the waves were dashing into the boat.

Soon they were in danger of being swamped; the vessel was beginning to fill. Even these experienced lake-fishers were terrified.

At last they took courage to rouse Him. "Master," they cried, "is it nothing to You that we are sinking?" Who could

ever have invented this petulant and disrespectful address? So understandable, however; their nerves were frayed, they were irritated by His reposeful aloofness. Waked by the drenched and quaking disciples, His first care was to calm their troubled hearts before dealing with the angry waters. "Why are ye so afraid?" He asked: "Have ye still no faith?" As much as to say that by now they should have been trained to assure that nothing could happen them when He, even though asleep, was with them.

Then He rose up and addressed the raging elements as if they were merely boisterous puppies. To the howling wind He said: "Silence!" To the heaving lake He said: "Quiet!" No prayer, no oblation, no calling on the Name; just the word of command. "And there came a great calm," so that the boat glided peacefully into Khenna by moonlight. No wonder the men were stupefied; "Who really is this Man whom even wind and water obey?"

Just think of what was at stake in this storm. The little band of men involved formed the nucleus of the Church. They might have drowned in the Lake, as happened to many a boat-load of men before and since. "Où, ye of little faith," exclaims Christ. He, though asleep, was watching over the barque, which the Fathers took as symbol of the Church.

He who calmed the storm could surely have prevented it. He who cured leprosy and reversed the doom of death, could have eliminated these ills. But He did not. So, too, He leaves us to face troubles and sorrows. It is enough for us to know that He is with us; and one day there will be a great calm.

## 25

### Paternoster

Mat. 6, 9-13, Luke 11, 1-4,

We say the *Our Father* so often that there is a danger of mere mechanical repetition. The danger is increased by the fact that we use rather antiquated words in what is really the Protestant version (1549), except that we say "who art" instead of "which art." In pre-Reformation times the prayer was mostly said in Latin, but there were Catholic English versions better than the present one (e.g. *sis* or *deus* instead of *triceps*).

According to St. Luke, a disciple asked Jesus: "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." Our Lord then gave this short prayer, as a model, not as a stereotyped formula. (In fact Luke's version differs somewhat from Matthew's.) Many spiritual writers have recommended briefly meditating on each clause.

#### *Our Father in Heaven*

The Jews did not usually appeal to God as Father, least of all as Father of all mankind. St. Paul, the ex-Pharisee, declared that when he became a Christian, he acquired a new spirit of sonship and cried "Abba, Father" (Romans 8, 15). We have become so accustomed to the phrase that we may fail to realise the wonderful revelation implied. If God is our Father, then each of us, however lowly or insignificant, is His child, the

object of providence and affection, endowed with a unique dignity. We need no longer feel submerged anonymously in an impersonal or hostile nature. The expression "in heaven" is not to be taken in a local sense, as if God were far off from us. God is our heavenly Father, who hears even our secret prayers. And this filial attitude is of course intensified when we reflect that the Son of God has become our Brother. To those that accept Him He has given power to become sons of God (John 1. 12).

Notice that we are to join with others in the prayer: our Father. God is the Father of all and each of us, without distinction of race or creed. As God's children, men have natural rights and an ultimate equality.

#### *May Your Name be revered*

Taking the Semitic use of Name into account, we might render this: May You be known and revered. This is an aspiration which we make before we engage in petitions for ourselves. It was significant in a world of pagan polytheism, this desire that real religion, the acknowledgement of God, might have its rightful place in human life. It is an even more poignant hope to-day in a world of aggressive atheism. And it is applicable to our individual lives. For so many people live in secular activity, relegating religion to a secondary or perfunctory place. May God enter more into our lives.

#### *May Your Kingdom be established*

Or we might say: May You reign over men. We hope for the regeneration of the world not through purely humanitarian means but by a deepening of religion. This aspiration for the coming of God's Kingdom on earth meant much to the Christians of the first centuries, a persecuted sect in a hostile world.

Over a large portion of the world the same conditions prevail to-day. In His earthly lifetime Our Lord had to combat a nationalistic exclusivist conception of the Kingdom of God among His compatriots. Nowadays the struggle is against a complete denial of the supernatural order, a repudiation of God's sovereignty.

*May Your will be done on earth as well as in heaven*

There is allusion here to the mystery of sin and evil, the terrible freedom of man to offend God. We pray that God's will may be done by us on earth as it is done by the angels in heaven. The aspiration is not limited to renunciation and acceptance of suffering; the primary reference is to active performance. May each of us obtain strength and grace to carry out God's subtle will in his life, not merely to avoid sin but to carry out positively God's design for his life on earth.

*Give us the bread of life to-day*

The adjective qualifying "bread" has been variously interpreted. The Old Latin version *daily* (which is also in the Vulgate of Matthew) has been retained in the liturgy and adopted in the current English version. But other versions interpret the word as *needed* or *necessary*, as the ration required to sustain life. God wishes us to pray to Him for the simple necessities of life—typified by bread—which so many of us take for granted. Ultimately, even through the mediation of human labour, it is God who has destined natural resources for our needs—the needs of all mankind.

But even as early as Tertullian (A.D. 200), this petition was interpreted as primarily applying to the satisfaction of our spiritual needs, and especially to the Eucharist. Christ declared He was the living Bread from heaven. He took bread and

said: This is My Body. The first Christians called the Eucharist "the Breaking of the Bread." So it is not only justifiable but salutary to make a spiritual application of this petition.

*Forgive us our offences, just as we have forgiven those who  
offended us<sup>1</sup>*

We must remember our sins whenever we say our prayers: not only my own sins, but *our* sins, the sins of all of us. Not only here but on several other occasions, Christ established a wonderful parallelism between God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of others. God's mercy is suspended so long as we are unmerciful. The reference is not to reparation for wrong done *by* us but to forgiveness of wrong done *to* us. Which is far more difficult. We have to evacuate all ill-will, to abandon all sense of grievance. God makes this a test of our worthiness to be forgiven by Him. So this petition should always be accompanied by an examination of conscience.

*And do not allow us to succumb to temptation, but save us  
from what is evil*

We can and should apply this word *temptation* to every influence, interior or exterior, impelling us to sin. But in the Bible the word nearly always signifies a trial, something unpleasant which tests our patience. And of course such trial or suffering often leads a person from religion. We ask God to help us to bear affliction, to stand up to difficult circumstances which may lead us away from Him. But, in the light of the Passion, we can deepen this petition. So we should ask God to help us even to be glad to suffer for and with His Son.

<sup>1</sup> In the language spoken by Our Lord (Aramaic) the same word denoted *debt* and *sins*. St. Matthew uses the past tense—we have already forgiven before we start praying—though the Vulgate has the present (*dimittimus, forgive*).



## 26

# A Wonderful Picnic

Mat. 14. 13-21.

Mark 6. 32-34.

Luke 9. 12-17.

John 6. 1-12.

By way of apprenticeship Our Lord had sent the Apostles by pairs on a missionary tour. They returned enthusiastic but tired.

So He told them to come with Him to a quiet spot for a rest and gentle training, away from the crowds and interruptions of Capernaum. Like holidaying schoolboys, the Apostles prepared for their excursion; each had a hamper of provisions, Peter's boat being always at their disposal, they crossed the Lake to the north-eastern shore south of Bethsaida.

The crowd they left behind on the western shore, now swollen by Passover pilgrims, became too impatient to wait for Christ's return. So after a few days they went round by land, fording the Jordan. The bivouacking Apostles must have viewed the invaders with displeasure. But Jesus patiently welcomed the people, for "He felt compassion for them as shepherdless sheep."

Late in the afternoon, after hours of teaching and healing, Our Lord was asked by the disciples to send the people away so that they might buy food in the neighbouring villages and towns. A very natural request. But He told them to look after the people themselves. The Apostles went away mystified by this seemingly impossible answer. They were not accustomed to expect miracles to supply ordinary needs.

After a while Jesus called Philip, who was a native of the district, and asked him where food could be obtained. Philip—who may have been procurator, as Judas was the treasurer—made a rapid estimate and declared that it would cost 200 dinars to procure a bread-ration for each. (A dinar represented a day's wages; and we know that it would have taken 200 dinars to buy 4,800 barley loaves. Philip was quite accurate!)

Our Lord then told the Apostles to find out if any supplies were available. The Apostles' hampers were empty by now; the people, who had hurriedly left their camps and caravans for a short excursion, had nothing. But Andrew reported that he had discovered a boy with five barley loaves and two sardines. That, thought Andrew, settled the matter.

"Bring them here to Me," said Christ. We, who acknowledge Him as God, are less surprised by the ensuing miracle than by the fact that He used this scanty store—our little contribution!—for His creative blessing. Bewildered, the Apostles complied.

They must have been even more astonished when they were told to arrange the crowd. For what? Not for a snack which they could have standing, but for a regular sit-down meal. The people were induced to sit down on the grass in 100 groups of 50 each, all eyes turned towards Christ.

The Apostles, each with his empty basket, came up to Him. And He filled each. Up and down they went serving the people, returning for fresh supplies. The guests were given a simple but hearty meal of bread and fish, with water from the Lake.

Our Lord then told the Apostles to collect the unused portions—He had supplied more than they could eat! And the surplus filled their twelve baskets. (Most inconvenient baskets for rationalists who are trying to explain the miracle away!)

It was a glad and memorable outing for the crowd; and the

Apostles felt very important. But to us the action seems unnecessary and it was most unlike Our Lord's general use of His miraculous powers. He had, as we shall see, a very special reason.

[It is usually assumed that Jesus' plan for a restful interlude—a few days' retreat for His missionaries, we might say—was frustrated by the crowd's arrival at the quiet spot before Him. This does not seem topographically possible. A crowd, including women and children, could not make the long circuit across the Jordan (probably a five hours' journey) faster than a boat sailing five miles across the Lake. So we can interpret Mark 6, 13 ("they out-went them") as meaning that the crowd became impatient and anticipated Jesus' return. An indication that the Apostles had spent several days in retreat is the fact that their hampers of provisions were now empty.]

Some thoughts: (1) The Apostles were tired after their preface tour, also they were probably too elated by success. Our Lord, like a kind "father superior," saw that they deserved a few days of vacation and needed a retreat under His direction. (2) Notice His patient kindness towards the noisy intruders; the Apostles did not give them such a welcome. (3) The miraculous production of food was so out of line with Christ's ordinary policy that it imperatively demands a spiritual significance. The eucharistic reference was not an invention of St. John.]

## Rehearsal for the Eucharist

THAT were peculiar features about the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Our Lord Himself once described the idea of miraculously producing food as a temptation from Satan; it would lead to a misconception of His function as Messiah. And in fact, when the nationalist Galileans saw how He could create food, they wanted to proclaim Him King Messiah; rations for guerrillas would be safe.

Yet Christ made sure that His disciples recognised the miraculous nature of the meal. He drew their attention to the absence of natural resources; and at the end He left them their erstwhile empty hampers full of bread.

But there was nothing specially wonderful about the way the loaves were distributed. He could have suddenly produced the food at each man's elbow; He could have made bread out of anything or nothing. He chose, however, to use the available supply and the co-operating labour of men. The Apostles walked with their baskets up and down the long rows of hungry people, distributing not their bread but His, though not given directly by His hand.

Even if John had not recorded the discourse delivered next day in Capernaum, the eucharistic reference would be obvious. (And the only other comparable miracle was the production of wine at Cana.) And so it was interpreted in the early Church, as we see not only from catacomb-paintings and

from the symbol of the Fish, but from the phrase (in the Acts of the Apostles) "the Breaking of the Bread."

We are inclined to overlook the patient pedagogy of Our Lord in training His chosen apprentices. The Apostles had just returned from their tour as novice-preachers. Now He was going to give them another preparatory lesson.

Just as He had put them to practice John's baptism long before He instituted the Christian Sacrament, so now He provided a rehearsal of the Eucharist. How exquisite was His method of gradual habituation and piecemeal initiation.

So when at the Last Supper He declared "This is My Body," they had been already prepared to receive this astounding statement. When He fed the 5,000, He did so with five loaves, not with 5,000; He did not just create 4,995 extra loaves. They all partook of the same food at the same time; it sufficed for them all. Only after a repetition of the miracle did the Apostles really grasp its tremendous implication.

And the day after the first multiplication, the Jews objected: "How can this man give us His Flesh to eat?" Many followers deserted. But Peter, speaking for the Apostles, declared: "Lord, to whom else can we go? It is only You who have the message of eternal life." It was their anticipatory act of faith.

And when in the years to come the Apostles broke and distributed the eucharistic bread to hungry souls, they must have thought of that wonderful afternoon meal near Bethsaida, which so closely foreshadowed their spiritual ministry.

And can we to-day help remembering that scene when we see our crowded communion-rails, or witness the ciborium-laden priests going up and down among the thousands at Lourdes or Fatima? Our Lord Eternus and mensas it all that day by the lakeside.

## Peter Sinks

Mat. 14, 22-32. Mark 6, 45-52.

John 6, 16-21.

After the crowd had been miraculously fed, there was great excitement. These sturdy Jewish patriots began to urge that this great miracle-worker should be made a nationalist leader against Rome. Even the Apostles were infected with the enthusiasm. Our Lord had to force them to get back into the boat. He Himself escaped from the importunate crowd by retiring up the hillside, where He engaged in solitary prayer.

The Apostles waited in vain for Him to rejoin them after the people had dispersed. Perhaps, they thought, He had gone round by land. Darkness was falling and the weather looked ominous. So they decided to sail for the western shore of the Lake. A contrary wind soon sprang up and the water became choppy. It was a storm, though not a dangerous hurricane. But they made no headway, in fact they were blown out of their course.

They were out in the deep, wet and despondent, unable to cope with the wind and waves. What a miserable ending to a glorious day! They thought of that other occasion when Jesus, in the boat with them, stilled the storm. Now, however, they were all alone. So they imagined. But Christ was praying for them; in the bright moonlight He even saw them from His hill-station on shore.

He decided to show them that He was with them, that He knew their difficulty. Thus He would train them to realise His presence when He would no longer be with them on earth. So He, who for Himself wearily tramped the roads and used a boat, came to the rescue of His friends by miraculously walking across the water.

Suddenly, amid the spray and in the early dawn, they saw a luminous Form passing by. A wail of terror and despair rose up from the crew. A ghost, a portent of imminent disaster! Then they heard His well-known voice: "It is I. Be not afraid!" These words of comfort have been heard ever since by simple souls in trouble. How wonderful is the Incarnation! These men were afraid of a ghost, but at home with the Son of God.

Peter, always in the lead, cried out: "Lord, since it is You, bid me to come to You across the water." It was a daring challenge. Though all the others might be craven-hearted, yet not Peter! Still he did not rely on himself, so it was not mere bravado. He showed wonderful faith in his conviction that Jesus could communicate His power and enable an ordinary mortal to defy gravity. There was love too in his request. Peter preferred to be by the Master's side on the stormy water than to be forsaken by Him in the boat; he would walk to land with Him.

Our Lord did not reject the suggestion; He did not crush Peter's enthusiasm; He wanted him to learn a lesson. Just one word: "Come!" The invitation was not merely permissive, it was effective, it conferred the required power. Peter at once stood on the gunwale. He half-wished he had not been so daring, as he felt the wind whistling past him and felt the hungry waves licking his feet. Still he began to walk towards Jesus. After a few steps, he looked fearfully at the howling

sea, he became self-conscious and frightened, he began to sink. How typical of Peter is this tremendous outburst of faith and enthusiasm, followed quickly by a relapse. He wanted to make a display but he only made a splash. But he humbled himself, he did not rely on swimming. He uttered an agonising appeal: "Lord, save me!"

Jesus at once stretched out His hand and caught him. Not till He held Peter safe did He address him. And then not to rebuke him. He did not say: "Why did you venture out? He asked: "Why did you hesitate?" He blamed him not for excessive temerity but for deficient trust. He need not have sunk. It was for Peter a salutary experience which stood him in good stead next day in Capernaum, when, others deserting, he declared for Christ.

Instead of having a miraculous march over the water, Peter was brought back to the boat by Jesus. Those on board paid homage: "You are really the Son of God." They had a momentary insight into His divinity. The wind died down; and presently they reached the shore.

[Some points. (1) What a difficult task Jesus had in patiently training His Apostles! On this occasion they joined with the nationalist crowd in proclaiming Him King Messiah. Our Lord had to force them back to the boat. (2) "It is I, so do not be afraid!" Words repeated after the Resurrection (Luke 24, 36). What a wonderful epitome of the Incarnation! Afraid of storms and ghosts, yet; but no longer need we be afraid of our loving God made Man. (3) Peter's impetuous love of his Master made him vehemently anxious to be near Him. So during the Passion (see No. 47). On both of these occasions Peter "fell." But after the Resurrection (see No. 99), Peter, now chastened, swam to Jesus.]



## God and Caesar

Matthew 22, 15-22. Mark 12, 13-17.

Luke 20, 20-26.

We accept the full implications of the Incarnation only when we realise that Our Lord lived as a man in a definite historical situation and dealt with the living, concrete problems of His time. It is for us, under the guidance of the Church, to extricate, and to apply to our own circumstances, the general principles involved. Let us illustrate this by the present incident, when a burning Jewish problem was brought before Him.

The rabbis were anxious to involve Our Lord in a political issue. Instead of approaching Him directly, they sent some young men professing to have scruples about paying the poll-tax to Rome and plausibly seeking guidance. With them were some adherents of the Herodian dynasty, hoping for its restoration (as happened subsequently with Herod Agrippa) but meanwhile keeping up good relations with the Roman authorities and opposed to any messianic claims.

After some preliminary flattery, they put the query to Him: "Is it or is it not right to pay the tax to the Emperor?" No party among the Jews could unreservedly answer: Right. The Jews might in fact submit to the necessity of paying taxes to the pagan ruler, but only so long as God did not restore the kingdom to Israel by sending the Messiah. The Pharisees were

expecting, or even hoping for, a negative answer from Christ. How could the Son of David advise people to pay the poll-tax to the Roman usurper? They could then denounce Him to the Governor. On the other hand, if, through fear of the consequences, He answered that payment was permissible, they counted on His losing popularity with the crowd and ceasing to be accepted as a religious leader.

Now, except for some extreme nationalists, the difficulty was theoretical. In practice the Jews had been for years paying taxes to the *de facto* government. Akiba, a century later, was the first rabbi to teach non-payment explicitly. So Christ saw through the stratagem of the deputation. He asked them to show Him the capitation-coin, which was a silver dinar. Unlike the ordinary copper coins, which had only palms, lilies or grapes stamped on them, the dinar bore the effigy of the Emperor. Without handling the coin, Christ asked them: "Of whom is this the image and the inscription?" Surprised at His apparent ignorance, they curtly answered: "Of the Emperor." Whereupon Jesus said to them: "Then pay to the Emperor what is the Emperor's, but pay to God what is God's."

The Pharisees did not object to using Roman coinage; it was only the Zealots, or extreme nationalists, who refused to handle a coin with an image. The Pharisees attributed an interim validity to Roman rule, which they regarded as preferable to Herodian tyranny. So in fact they had already decided the case of conscience for themselves, as Our Lord pointed out. But He did more than score a debating point. The incident would not have been recorded at all, if the early Christians had not seen a general principle involved, as later enunciated by St. Paul (Romans 13). The religious man is not only permitted but bound to pay taxes, even if he holds that the government is merely *de facto*. Our Lord repudiated the religious nationalism

which led to the extinction of the Jewish commonwealth; this was the view accepted by the early Church.

But the second clause (give to God what is God's) is the vital one, to which the first is subordinate. The Emperor is not a power independent of, or co-ordinate with, God; his power was limited and came to him by delegation from God. Thus Christ rejected the idea of Cæsar as high-priest (*summus sacerdos*), guardian and interpreter of dogma and cult. But Our Lord went beyond current Judaism in two ways. He refused to nationalise religion, to regard it as incompatible with the secular State. And He founded a new spiritual society, a visible Church distinct from, but not subservient of, the State. After a bitter struggle of three centuries, this distinction of spiritual and secular was accepted.

But in our day the old State-gods have reawakened. Cæsar claims not only what is Cæsar's but also what is God's. The State claims not only payment of taxes but man's total subjection and loyalty. The answer of Christianity is that there is a domain in which "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 4. 19).

["Augustus, though founder of the Empire, did not wish to be called Lord, for this is God's name. I will give the Emperor the title of Lord in the ordinary sense, provided I am not forced to call him Lord in God's place. I have only one Lord: God omnipotent and eternal, who is also Lord of the Emperor."—Tertullian (*Apol.* 34).

"It is claimed that everything is lawful for the Emperor, that all things are his. I reply: Emperor, do not burden yourself with the idea that you have any imperial power over what belongs to God."—St. Ambrose (*Ep.* 70. 18).]

## The Little Man on the Tree

LUKE 19. 1-10.

JERUSALEM, in Roman Judea, was on the frontier of Herod's Transjordan. It was the centre of the balsam trade, it exported fruit and salt; caravans from Syria and the East passed through the town. A Roman company farmed the customs and excise; their local manager was a Jew called Zakkai.

One day, Our Lord, surrounded by a great crowd, was passing through on His way to Jerusalem. Zakkai was anxious to see the great Prophet, who was reputed to be not unfriendly to his class. The sequel shows that he was actuated by something more than curiosity; nor was he wishing to see a prodigy; he was urged by yearnings as yet only half-conscious.

But Zakkai was low-sized; he was unable to see over the heads of the close-packed crowd. So, compromising his dignity as a well-to-do businessman, he ran ahead along the Jerusalem road and climbed up into a sycamore tree, whose branches are low and horizontal. There, concealed in the foliage, he waited for the procession. Surely a unique approach to Jesus! The man had no request to make, no ailments to be cured, no formulated spiritual need. He just wanted to get a glimpse of the Prophet from his hiding-place.

A greeting, a wave of the hand, was far beyond his expectation. But he got much more. For Christ stood still on reaching the spot. In the ensuing silence He looked up and saw the rather

comic figure of the little customs commissioner peering down at Him from the tree. The look of Jesus: it brought sorrow to the rich young man, tears to the eyes of Peter, a strange soul-stirring to Zakkai.

And Our Lord addressed him. No sermon, no instruction, no denunciation; merely a request for a favour. He asked for dinner, not repentance; just as He requested a drink from the woman of Samaria. "Zakkai, come down quickly, for I am going to be guest in your house to-day." The only recorded instance of His inviting Himself into anyone's home.

Down at once came the commissioner. To his dismay, he heard a buzz of protest from the crowd. It was an insult to the town, a violation of religious taboo. To dine with this dishonest tool of the Romans, instead of choosing the house of a respectable citizen! But Zakkai stood up to this attempted ostracism, and responded to grace.

He boldly acknowledged his malpractice; not only would he make fourfold restitution to those he had defrauded, he announced that he would give away half of his fortune to the poor. Jesus was merely his guest, not his judge or critic. But, without hint or reproach, he knows now the principles of his Guest. As he climbed the tree that morning, he was little more than a sighseer. But through personal magnetism, through grace, he had experienced an inner crisis.

And Christ accepted him. He did not ask him, as He urged the rich youth, to sell everything and to follow Him. He did not invite him, like the customs officer, Matthew, to abandon his profession and to become a disciple. And yet salvation came to his house, and Christ proclaimed Zakkai to be not an excommunicated outcast, but a true son of Abraham. An encomium on a reformed businessman not without significance to-day.

## 31

# Our Lord as Servant

John 13. 4-11.

How human and imperfect were the Apostles before Pentecost. Even at the Last Supper they had a dispute among themselves concerning their relative status and precedence. They had taken a ritual bath, but their sandalled feet needed washing after walking on the dusty road. This was always done by a menial for a guest. Perhaps on ordinary occasions the disciples performed this humble office in turn. This evening none of them would act as servant to the others, though a jug of cool water, a basin and a towel were provided. So Our Lord got up, divested Himself of His outer garment, tied the towel round His waist.

He came with the basin of water to Simon Peter. It is difficult for us to realise the punctiliousness of oriental etiquette. It was simply unthinkable that a man should wash his servant's feet or that a rabbi should perform menial service for his disciple. So naturally Peter drew up his feet and protested against his Master's proposal. There ensued this vivid dialogue between Christ and Peter:

- P. Lord, do You really mean to wash my feet?  
C. You cannot now understand what I am doing. But you will understand later on.  
P. You will never wash my feet!  
C. Unless I do so, you can have no further association with Me.

P. Then, Lord, wash not only my feet but my hands and my face!

C. After a bath, all one needs is to have his feet washed in order to be quite clean. And ye are clean, though not all of you.

Characteristically Peter passed from a blunt refusal to an even more vehement request. Meeting the upward glance of the kneeling Master, he impetuously changed his attitude. Separation from Jesus would be far worse than the humiliation of accepting this menial service from Him. So Jesus, without meeting further remonstrance, washed the feet of the Twelve, even of Judas.

Christ's reference to not understanding and to all not being clean shows that He was interested in something more than mere bodily cleansing and comfort. He wished not only to wash the dust from their feet but pride and uncharitableness from their hearts, to restore fraternal charity and humility in preparation for Holy Communion. He could well have eaten with men whose feet were dusty, but not with disciples filled with bickering and antagonism. And He did succeed in washing away this evil spirit. Was there one of them—not excepting Judas—who was not touched and shamed by this action of Our Lord?

He proceeded to teach them the lesson: "If then I, who am Lord and Master, have washed your feet, ye too should wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, so that ye may do as I have done for you." And a little later, after the departure of Judas, He said: "I am giving you a new commandment to love one another. Love one another as I have loved you." His deed, an acted parable, was more eloquent than any sermon. It was a fundamental social message: humility and readiness to serve. There was no implication that difference

of status was abolished. No false egalitarianism and no reliance on secular humanitarianism. Such self-abasing service is to be based on His example: "As I have loved you." This action of Jesus has inspired heroic social service down the centuries.

If we relied on mere scriptural proof, apart from the guidance of the Church, we could make a strong case for regarding foot-washing as a sacrament. And indeed this "pedilavium" has survived as a liturgical service (at least on Holy Thursday) to our own day. But the principle inculcated by Our Lord is deeper than literal imitation or material repetition of the ceremony. No work is really menial, no service is degrading, no difference of rank justifies a dispensation, no religious devotion constitutes an exemption. What we fail to do for the lowliest of our brothers, we have failed to do for Christ Himself.

[Some points: (1) Even at this stage the Apostles displayed petty jealousy and bickering, anxious about places at table and rank in the kingdom. Sometimes even good people, ecclesiastics and religious, are fussy and parrackety about such trifles. (2) Jesus did not lose patience. By undertaking menial service Himself, He gave a gentle but unforgettable lesson. (Teaching by gesture and action was more familiar in the East than with us.) And He thus ennobled even the lowliest service. (3) Peter, conscious that he was a sinful man (see No. 29), felt humiliated; he protested vigorously. Threatened by separation from Jesus, he submitted with equal vehemence. None of the Apostles received such severe rebukes as did Peter; he needed such correction and profited by it.]



## 32

### A Soldier's Faith

Matt. 8. 5-13. Luke 7. 1-10.

CHANGING a single word, we repeat, before Holy Communion, the words addressed one day to Our Lord by a pagan soldier.

He was a Centurion—N.C.O., let us call him Sergeant—serving in Capharnaum, a frontier town in the territory of Herod Antipas. His servant or "boy," to whom he was attached, was at death's door.

He had heard about Jesus, so he got hold of some influential Jews to intercede for him. It was rather embarrassing for them to admit Jesus' power and to plead for a Gentile. But they could not well refuse. "This man," they said to Christ, "deserves this favour from You. For he loves our nation and built our synagogue for us." He belonged to that class of friendly heathens who formed the first Gentile converts to Christianity.

Hearing that Jesus was coming, the Sergeant at once sent some friends with this message. "Lord, I am not worthy to have You enter my house. Just say the word of command and my boy will be cured." As if to say: "No necessity to come to my place, Sir. A General does not visit a Sergeant. Issue Your order, it will be carried out."

The message went on to explain this military analogy: "Though I am only an inferior officer, I have soldiers under me. To one I say 'Go,' and he goes; to another 'Come,' and

he comes." Our Lord was filled with admiration for the straightforward attitude of this uncomplicated pagan. The soldier transferred the conditions of his own life to the unseen world.

He knew the Jewish belief that the angels are God's invisible messengers. And without hesitation he crowned Jesus as Emperor of the world of spirits and of nature, as Commander of legions of angels, to one of whom He need only say "Go and cure."

Humanly speaking, Our Lord sometimes marvelled at men's unbelief; now He was astonished at belief. Not even in Israel, He declared, had He found faith like this. This man's faith rose above all limitations of time and space, of sight and sense.

Christ's prophetic eye saw in this soldier the first of the myriads of erstwhile pagans and their descendants who were to come from east and west and sit down in God's kingdom, while those who claimed Abraham for father refused to enter. In a very real sense He heard the Sergeant's words taken up in the mighty chorus of centuries.

Down the ages multitudes have sought to deserve the exultation given by Christ to this Sergeant of Capernaum. We of to-day repeat the soldier's words, as if to remind Our Lord of this bygone scene.

We are asking for even a greater favour than a material cure; we, though unworthy, actually receive Him into the house of our soul. Let us say our *Domine non sum dignus* with faith and gratitude.

## 33

# Through the Roof

Mat. 9, 1-8. Mark 2, 1-12.

Luke 5, 17-26.

THE news spread that Our Lord had returned to Capernaum. So many gathered to hear Him that the patio or courtyard was packed with the crowd. A man suffering from paralysis was so eager to be cured that he got four friends to carry him on a sheepskin blanket. But they were unable to get near Christ.

Most Palestinian houses had an outside staircase leading to the flat roof where there was often an "upper room" for guests. The men took the patient up on the roof; they either enlarged an existing hatchway or more probably removed portion of the parapet (made of hollow cylindrical tiles), and thus let the man down near Jesus, by tying their sashes to the corners of the blanket.

Moved by the zeal of the bearers, who were peering down at Him, Our Lord turned to the silent paralytic at His feet and said: "Cheer up, son, your sins are forgiven." Christ did not encourage speculations about the relation of sin and disease. Here, putting pardon first, He showed, against current belief, that a man may have to continue to suffer and yet can be in the state of grace.

Sitting there to watch Him were theologians from Jerusalem. These at once realized the tremendous claim made by Jesus:

"Who is this man who is uttering blasphemies? Only God can forgive sins." More logically than many modern critics, the Pharisees were right in declaring that He was a liar and a blasphemer—if He were a mere man.

Christ gave them an unexpected answer: "Which is easier to say: 'Your sins are forgiven you' or 'Get up and walk'?" That is, which statement can be made with greater impunity, with less fear of detection.

Some modern admirers of Christ admit the unverifiable half of the story, the insight into the man's repentant heart, while they reject the half which could be observed by a human witness. But Christ made the verifiable cure a visible proof not merely that He was clairvoyant but that "the Son of Man has authority here on earth to forgive sins." He then said to the paralytic: "Get up, take your blanket, and go home."

The man did so at once. The crowd were astonished. Though vanquished, the Jewish leaders obstinately adhered to their rejection of Him, just as present-day sceptics are not converted even by a miracle.

We are so used to Confession, so inclined to take for granted its wonderful spiritual implication—much harder to realise than a physical prodigy—that it is useful for us to ponder over the shock of the Jews when Our Lord claimed to forgive a man's sins, to cancel his debt to God. Christ is no longer physically in our midst. But He has handed on His power to representatives on earth, who are authorised to speak to us in His name: Cheer up, your sins are forgiven.

## 34

# The Warden's Daughter

Mat. 9, 18-19, 23-24. Mark 5, 21-24, 31-43.

Luke 8, 42-43, 49-56.

Arras crossing the Lake from the eastern shore, Our Lord landed at His adopted town Capernaum. He started to teach those who flocked to hear Him. The warden of the local synagogue, a man called Jair (Ya-ir), broke through and urgently requested Him to come and cure his twelve-year-old daughter who was at the point of death. Jair was not a disciple, he was probably in the opposition camp. Only when his child was at death's door did he pay homage to Christ. Grief often brings men to God.

Jesus showed no annoyance at this sudden interruption. He "stood up and followed him." A curious crowd joined in. There was a halt. Our Lord dealt leniently with the case of an ailing woman. (See No. 42.) The delay must have sorely tried Jair's patience. His worst fears were realized when a messenger ran up to him and whispered: "Your daughter is dead. Do not trouble the Rabbi further." It never occurred to them that at this stage Jesus could be of any help. He might have cured her illness, but He could not restore her to life.

The grief-stricken father dumbly acquiesced. He wondered sadly why Jesus had delayed until it was too late. But Our Lord, who had overheard the despairing message, turned to

Jair and said: "Have no fear. Keep up your faith. She will be all right." He does not contradict the messenger, but with calm confidence He told the father to trust Him. Of course, it might have been true that the child was not literally dead but only comatose. But this supposition does not get rid of the miraculous. How, in spite of the message, did He know? How was He so sure of being able to "awake" her?

The delay must have been considerable. For when they reached the house, the professional wailing women, customary in the East, were already engaged in loud lamentations. "Stop your wailing," said Jesus to them. "The little girl is not dead but only asleep." This announcement was met by sceptical jeers, for—as St. Luke says—"they knew well that she was dead." Nor, as we see from the story of Lazarus, do Christ's words imply otherwise. For Him it was as easy to recall her soul to life as it would be to awaken her from slumber. As we presently learn from His injunction to silence, He did not wish His power over the dead to be bruited too much abroad, lest His spiritual work be hindered by the importunity of grieving relatives. He preferred people to imagine that the girl had merely swooned.

Disliking the simulated sorrow of the mercenary mourners and the curiosity of onlookers, He put them all out of the house. Into the child's room He allowed only the parents and His three Apostles: Peter, James and John. (So later on Peter too cleared the room when about to raise Tabitha.) He went up to the child's couch and took her by the hand. Then in a loud voice He said: "Little girl, get up!" St. Mark gives us the very Aramaic words used: *Talitha kumi!* "Her spirit returned to her, and she got up at once."

After this wonderful event is recorded so simply and naturally, St. Mark adds some homely details. The girl "began to walk

about," to peevish and to play. Then Jesus "told them to give her something to eat." He knew she was hungry; and her overjoyed parents seemed incapable of action. How charmingly thoughtful and kind was Our Lord, especially when dealing with children—and with the childlike.

In this incident we see how responsive Jesus was to the call of the grief-stricken, how sometimes—here as in the case of Martha and Mary—He tried His petitioners' faith by delaying His intervention. He appears as the Master of life and death, giving us confidence that He is with us now and hereafter. And surely, without over-subtlety, we can apply to the spiritual domain what we here read of physical illness and death. Little girl—or young man (as at Nain)—arise! These are words which invite, command and give the necessary power and grace. As our souls are sick, sometimes mortally sick, we can apply these gracious words to ourselves.

[Some points: (1) Notice Our Lord's ready compliance even with a request made by a suffering enemy, especially on behalf of a child. (2) The long delay, caused by curing a woman of an embarrassing affliction, sorely tried the father, who however made no protest or complaint. Death having supervened, the man thought it useless to trouble the Rabbi further; he was wrong. (3) Observe how Jesus carefully avoided inconvenient publicity by performing the miracle in private. (4) Thoughtful tenderness coalesced with divine power. It was Jesus, not even the parents, who thought of feeding the hungry girl.]

## The Cripple at the Pool

John 5. 1-9.

ON one of Our Lord's visits to Jerusalem for a Jewish festival, He visited, "near the Sheep-Pool, a building which in Aramaic was called Bethesda" (House of Mercy). "It has five colonnades, in which there used to be a great crowd of sick." To the discomfort of the allegorists—who for instance interpreted the five porches as man's five senses!—this pool, with traces of its five cloisters, has in recent years been re-discovered near the church of St. Anne, north of the Temple esplanade.

Jesus stopped before a poor man lying there. Perhaps he was the most friendless or the most chronic case in this non-descript hospital; he had been afflicted, probably crippled, for thirty-eight years. It is the only recorded occasion on which Our Lord asked a question without being addressed first. "Would you like to be cured?" He asked. There must have been some reason for this surprising query. Perhaps the man's face showed dull hopeless acquiescence, and he was resigned to an idle life of mendicancy.

The man showed no expectation of a cure, nor did he know his questioner's identity. He felt he had been charged with neglect, and hastened to explain that he had no friend to help him to avail of the supposed curative properties of the water. There is a verse in St. John—which is very probably an inserted gloss—telling us that the pool periodically became turbulent.



Popular legend explained this as a miracle which—as in the Jewish theory of miraculous interventions—was due to an angel. Such an unparalleled periodical miracle is most unlikely. But it is difficult to conjecture the natural event alluded to.

"Get up!" said Jesus. In the mouth of anyone else, this command would have been a mockery. But Christ's words were not merely declaratory or desiderative, they were objectively effective. In the act of obeying, the man was cured. He stood up on his feet. Then Christ said: "Take up your mat and walk!" The man went joyfully away, carrying the rolled-up mat under his arm. The injunction was a test of his faith and gratitude, it identified him as a patient who had recovered. He could not only walk without support, but he could carry a burden. And thereby caused a scandal which was deliberately engineered by Our Lord. On an ordinary week-day the cure might have passed unnoticed, at least there would have been no excitement. But on a day of Sabbath-rest a man carrying a mat attracted attention.

The religious authorities would probably have tried to ignore the miracle, but they felt they could not overlook the public offence of mat-carrying. It is an attitude which we of to-day find difficult to understand. They accosted the man and said: "It is against the Law for you to carry your mat." He replied that his healer had told him to do so. With instinctive logic deeper than their pedantry, he felt that the person who worked such a miracle could not enjoin what was wrong. They then asked him, not "Who cured you?" but "Who told you?" But he did not know his benefactor's identity. They took no interest in the erstwhile cripple, they took no notice of his cure, they were concerned solely with the breach of the Sabbath-law. And indeed they had the letter of the law strongly on their side.

Later, perhaps next day, the man went to the Temple—did he ever drag himself there before? There Jesus found him and said: "You are now cured. Do not continue any longer in sin lest there happen to you something worse"—worse than a lifetime of incapacity or even than death. The fear of punishment has its place. Our Lord knew the man's sickness of soul as well as of body.

Without any malice "the man went and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had cured him." He said nothing about Sabbath-breaking. It was about this, and not about the miracle, that the Pharisees argued with Our Lord, whose defence clearly implied His parity with God.

This little story gives us a vivid picture not only of Our Lord's powers but also of the heated opposition He encountered from the Jewish rabbis.



*Reconstruction of Jerusalem with five gates.  
The Church of St. Mary was erected against  
one of the gates.*

## I was Blind and now I can See

John 9. 1-41.

ONE day when Our Lord was passing by, He stopped and looked at a congenitally blind man who sat begging for alms near the Temple. The Apostles put a query to the Master: "On account of whose sin—his own or his parents'—was this man born blind?" It was a perplexing problem for the Jews, who generally held that all sickness was a judgment on sin—in spite of Job and Ezechiel. The disciples wanted to know if the sin was that of his parents or his own prenatal sin, each being the two current theories. It never occurred to them to ask Jesus to cure the man; it is so much easier to blame the sufferer—or genetics—than to give practical help. Our Lord never entered into merely academic or abstract problems. So He replied briefly that in the present case blindness was due neither to personal nor to parental sin.

He then proceeded to action. Spitting on the ground, He made a paste with saliva and dust, and rubbed it over the man's eyes. "Go now," He said to him, "and bathe your eyes in the Pool of Siloam." The man did so, and came away able to see. On other occasions He cured blindness with a touch. He now employed a seemingly medical treatment chiefly to raise an issue with His opponents. It was a Sabbath and on two counts He violated rabbinic rules: He worked at "kneading" by making a paste or clay-ointment, and He applied a salve to the man's eyes. It is hard for us to-day to realize that this infraction produced more excitement among the Jewish religious authorities than did the miracle.

The man went home after being cured. His neighbours could hardly believe it was the same man. He recounted what happened and summarized thus: "I went, I washed and I see," More terse and graphic than even Caesar's celebrated report: I came, I saw, I conquered.

The case—not the miracle but the anointing on the Sabbath—was brought before a group of rabbis teaching and answering questions. These religious leaders were divided. A minority argued: A miracle, therefore not by a sinner; a miracle could not be effected by sinful means; so God must have approved of the clay-making. But the majority held: The act was sinful, a violation of the Law; therefore a miracle could not have occurred. It was not altogether unlike the discussion of a miracle to-day, if for the Mosaic Law we substitute natural law.

The man's parents, obscure humble people, were sent for. An attempt was made to intimidate them into saying either that he was not their son or that he had been shamming blindness. They accepted him as their erstwhile son but could give no explanation of the cure. "He is of full age," they said, "you must ask himself."

They recalled the beggar and tried to browbeat him. He refused to be coerced by these learned men, he adhered to the reality he had experienced, avoiding theological entanglement: "All I know is that I was blind and now I can see." Finally the beggar was goaded by their bullying into unexpected boldness. The man whose eyes had been opened now opened his mouth. The attitude of this ignorant fellow was intolerable. "You were born sin-marked," they said, thus admitting his blindness. "Are you trying to teach us?" So they ejected him ignominiously. He was, one might say, the pioneer Christian conference.

Hearing of his expulsion, Jesus sought out the man who

had never actually seen Him. And privately to this uneducated beggar He revealed Himself as the Son of God. Trusting the Benefactor whom he had so ably defended, without of course grasping the full implication of the Incarnation, the man professed faith and prostrated himself before Our Lord.

This vivid story presents us with a miracle thoroughly investigated and discussed. But Christ Himself pointed out the spiritual application. Before working it, He declared that He was the Light of the World. And after it, He said: "My coming into this world results in a segregation: the sightless see and the seeing become blind." The learned, the Jewish theologians, who professed to have spiritual vision, became blind to Him when He appeared. The blind man, an uneducated beggar, received from Jesus not only bodily but also spiritual sight. The contrast—this segregation or discrimination—has continued down the centuries.

## 37

# The Death of a Friend

John 11. 34-41.

ARRA. Our Lord met the two grieving sisters (see No. 50). He wept in sympathy with them. The Jews who had been condoling with them had followed them out of the house. When they noticed Jesus' tears, the bystanders said: "See how He loved him." But some who were hostile murmured: "Could not this man who gave the blind man sight have kept Lazarus from dying?" These critics, compelled by facts, admitted Jesus' curative powers. But they took it for granted that He could not resuscitate a buried man. No one, not even the disciples or the sisters, anticipated such a miracle.

"Where have ye laid him?" He asked. He, who at a distance knew that Lazarus was dead and was now about to restore him to life, asks for this information. In the Gospels there is always this economy of the divine, this juxtaposition of the natural and the superhuman, which makes the Incarnation unique. "Come and see, Lord," they answered, thinking He wished to express His grief at the grave. So far one might read the narrative without any miraculous intrusion; provided one attributed Christ's knowledge of Lazarus' death to a shrewd diagnosis or a paranormal faculty. But now the story is going to burst through all natural categories of behaviour.

They arrived at the rock-excavated tomb and stood in silence. There came the unexpected authoritative command: "Remove

the stone." Notice once more how Our Lord exacted the maximum human co-operation even in the immediate context of a transcendent miracle. Martha, practical-minded even in sorrow, was horrified. The Master, she thought, wished to look once more on the countenance of His friend. Clearly He did not realize that he was four days in his grave. He must be spared the gruesome sight. She hurriedly intervened. "Lord," she exclaimed, "by this time he is decaying." In the Greek her language is even stronger: he is stinking. And in early pictorial representations, some of the bystanders are holding their noses. That was Martha's preoccupation. What a touch of homely, almost offensive, realism!

Christ reminded her of the message He had sent her from Transjordan: "Have I not told you that if you have faith, you will see the glory of God?" Martha made no further objection. "They removed the stone." The scene was set. Jesus lifted up His eyes and said: "Father, I thank You for having heard Me. I know that You always hear Me. But I am saying this for the sake of the bystanders, that they may realize that it is You who sent Me."

Then suddenly in a loud voice that thrilled the spectators, He cried: "Lazarus, come out!" Every eye was riveted on the dark mouth of the opened sepulchre. That triumphant summons had penetrated beyond the confines of this world; for its echo among the rocks had hardly ceased, when a white-clad figure stood sharply outlined against the gloom. For an instant they all recoiled from the corpse-like apparition. And then once more came the quiet voice of the Master, bringing them back to ordinary life: "Free him so that he may walk." Lazarus had come back to Martha and Mary.

He was not merely restored to his sisters, he was brought back for you and for me. Jesus first showed us that He is with

us in sorrow and in bereavement, His tears are the consecration of ours. And then He showed us that He is the Master of life and of death, that His authority reaches into the great beyond, that those who have faith in Him will never die. There is, as St. John tells us in the Apocalypse, another Jerusalem, a Holy City, wherein "God's tabernacle is set up amongst men, God will dwell with them. . . . And He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death; no more grief or weeping or pain."

[Points on which to reflect in Meditations 50 and 37. (1) Jesus' friendship with the hospitable Bethany sisters who had been confidentially told of His hide-out and could send a message to Him. (2) The beautiful prayer, so lovingly trustful: He whom You love is sick. Like Our Lady's: They haven't any more wine. (3) Jesus had to coax His Apostles to return to the danger zone. But the sisters knew He would come. Without Him, the crowds of mourners meant nothing to them. They kept a look-out for Jesus. (4) Martha's wonderful confession of faith. Yet she thought He could not cure from a distance, still less raise her brother from the grave. (5) Jesus shared the grief of His friends and wept with them. But by His cry "Lazarus, come out," He showed He was the Master of life and death. He spoke to their dead brother, while Martha was expecting only a repulsive sight and a fetid smell.]



## A Persistent Beggar

*Mat.* 20. 29-34.      *Mark* 80. 48-51.

*Luke* 18. 31-43.

On a spring morning a procession was emerging from the tropically luxuriant city of Jericho. It was not an irregular crowd, it was an orderly caravan proceeding to face the brigand-infested ascent to Jerusalem. In it Jesus and His disciples travelled for the last time to the metropolis.

At the city gate beggars sat, expecting a rich harvest from the Passover pilgrims. Among them were two sightless men; perhaps one was only partially blind and led the other who, in the account, plays the prominent part. Exceptionally we are told his name: Bar-Timaei. It looks as if subsequently he became a well-known disciple.

Hearing the noise of a jubilant crowd approaching, he asked what was happening. He was told that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by. Even the blind knew all about the famous Prophet, who had even restored men's sight. Bar-Timaei was only a roadside beggar, but he had learnt that Jesus was the friend of outcasts and poor. When the head of the caravan got near, he decided to forgo his opportunity for successful begging. His eyesight was more important; his chance had come. He started to shout: "Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!" (This was a messianic title, to which Our Lord does not seem to have objected.)

Those in the front of the procession readily told him to shut up. They thought it improper for a beggar to seek audience with the Master, and they thought his cry rather exaggerated. He did not get much encouragement from Jesus' friends. How often do good people object to what they consider unregulated devotion! But the irrepressible mendicant shouted all the more loudly. What obstacles he had to overcome!

On reaching the spot, Jesus heard him. In spite of the inconvenience caused, He halted the caravan and asked to have the man brought to Him. Our Lord's followers quickly changed their tune. They started to encourage and to patronize the blind beggar. "Courage!" they said. "Get up! He is calling you." And they conducted the man, and his companion, to Jesus.

"What do you want Me to do for you?" He asked. Surely a royal invitation: Name your wish. Of course, Jesus knew well what the man wanted; but He wished him to specify his petition. When we pray, He knows what we are going to ask; nevertheless He wishes us to ask, that we may receive.

"Rabbi," said Bar-Timai, "I want my eyesight." The Greek may well mean "that I may see again." If so, the man had not always been blind; his case was the more pitiable if he had been reduced to beggary by his disability; and he was all the keener to be cured. So very probably he was asking for the recovery of his sight.

St. Matthew tells us that "Jesus, moved with compassion, touched the man's eyes." The other evangelists give us His words to Bar-Timai: "Have your sight back. Your faith has brought you healing." This time Christ did not use any symbolical gesture or intervening action. The man received the instant reward of his stubborn faith.

Bar-Timai "immediately recovered his sight, and he began

to follow Jesus, praising God." He probably followed Our Lord to Jerusalem, where he was a witness of the Passion and of the Resurrection. His name is carefully given by St. Mark; it is the only healing miracle where the name of the person healed is given. This suggests that he became afterwards known in the Church.

This little story of the blind beggar shows us how much kinder and more accessible Our Lord was than even His immediate disciples. Beggars, sinners, children—these came confidently to Him for welcome, cure, forgiveness; while the learned and the important people held aloof.

## A Devout Old Lady

Luke 2. 36-38.

WHEN the infant was presented in the Temple (see No. 8), two devout old people welcomed Jesus, while the priests and the officials were quite unaware of the momentous event. Our Lord's destiny was to grow up in obscurity and consequent security, glimpsed only by a few simple people like the shepherds. The exception was the Magi, whose advent brought danger and exile.

In addition to Simeon, a saintly old lady called Anna welcomed the infant Messiah. She was probably a person of some distinction, for we are told her father's name, her tribe, her age. She was able to claim descent from one of the "lost ten tribes" exiled by the Assyrian kings. Little more than twenty when she became a widow, she was now eighty-four years of age. Born about 90 B.C., she had lived through many important events and crises in her country's history: the death of Alexander Jannæus, the death of Queen Alexandra, the capture of Jerusalem by Pompey, civil war, the advent of Herod, the start at rebuilding the Temple.

But she pursued the even tenor of her life. Ordinarily a young widow would marry again; she, however, deliberately refrained from a second marriage.

She led a holy life devoted to works of supererogation: fasting, praying, attendance at liturgical functions. Besides

the priests and the leuites, there were probably women engaged in the Temple service, e.g. lamp-trimming, sweeping, etc. Perhaps Anna looked after mothers who came for purification.

She is called "a prophetess." This does not necessarily imply a person who predicts the future, but rather a woman who lives in union with God and gives spiritual advice to others.

She joined Simeon in welcoming the Holy Family and in thanking God. No words are attributed to her. But we are told that "she kept talking about the Child to all who were expecting the Deliverance of Jerusalem." We must not exaggerate this publicity. Under Herod it was extremely unlikely that people would openly indulge in such expectations. The news that the Messiah was born was quietly spread among a number of pious people who frequented the Temple.

Why should we pause to meditate a little on this inoffensive old lady? We are inclined to forget that the Temple was a place of prayer for devout souls who were much nearer to God than the worldly chief priests. We read so much of the shortcomings of the Pharisees, or rather of many among them, that we tend to overlook the genuine piety which existed in Israel. There were many like Zachary and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna. It was these who quietly welcomed the Infant Saviour.

Anna was probably the first woman who, after Our Lady, held the divine Child. Her name may not be known to secular history, her life was not connected with any great events as the world judges. But she is the forerunner and the patroness of a long line of Christian women who, amid lives of drudgery and obscurity, serve God faithfully and welcome Jesus into their souls.

## The Woman at the Well

John 4. 1-26.

HAVING failed in Judea, Our Lord started back to Galilee. After walking since early morning over the rough paths, the party arrived about midday at the Plain of Muknah in Samaria. Jesus sat on the broad rim of a well which Jacob had once excavated, while the disciples went into the nearby town to purchase provisions. He was really tired and thirsty as He rested there alone. It is hard to grasp the grim reality of a crucifix; we cannot stretch nail-pierced hands to our dying Lord. But how near He is to us by Jacob's Well, consecrating by His own experience our fatigue, lassitude, loneliness.

Presently a woman came along, an empty water-jar on her head, a little bucket with rope in her hand. She was thinking of household matters when she espied a man, a stranger whom she studiously ignored. To all appearances it was a chance encounter; but Jesus was waiting for her. She was a very ordinary, even vulgar, woman; we do not even know her name. Little did she realise how momentous was this meeting, which would be recorded for millions of readers.

About to depart with her water-jar filled, the Stranger said: "Give Me a drink." He was really thirsty; here as later on Calvary He asked a foreigner for a drink. Without leather bucket and rope, He was dependent on a chance comer. He who created bread and fish for the hungry crowd would not use such power for His own needs. He led our life. She gave

him a pert answer: how could He, a Jew, ask her, a woman and a Samaritan, for a drink. "If you understood God's gift," He replied, "and who it is that asked for a drink, it is you who would have been asking Him—and He would have given you living water." Intrigued by this mysterious reply which periodically reversed their roles, she said: "The well is deep and You have no bucket. So where could You get running water?" "Whoever drinks of the water which I give him," said Jesus, "will never again be thirsty." We know what He meant. After 2,000 years the message of Christ is still fresh and continually renewed, welling up in the soul to last for eternity.

She did not yet grasp His higher meaning. Perhaps He was a magician or the holder of a secret which would relieve her of this daily drudgery of water-fetching (still a burden for her sisters in Asia and Africa). "Sir," she cried, "give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty and need not keep coming here to draw water." We too sometimes are tempted to think that the function of religion is to make things easy, to eliminate discomfort and toil. Already in her outburst there was a dim recognition of spiritual reality. She did keep coming daily, but joyously in possession of God's gift of grace. Did she sometimes fancy that she saw His Figure once more? Yes, He was there. But henceforth she lived by faith, not by sight.

We might think she was so dull and unspiritual that Jesus would give up. But no. He was interested in her, even as He is interested in me and you. With patient gentleness He kept seeking entry to her soul. Her childlike, almost childish, simplicity, joined to growing trust in Him, He regarded as more promising material than He had found in the cultured Nicodemus.

Having won her confidence and respect, He saw how to get her to confess her sin. "Go and call your husband," He said, "and then come back here." "I have no husband," she replied. And now He had His chance to turn her mind to her shame and sin, to make her forget the water in the well and to excite in her a thirst for spiritual relief. There was no harsh denunciation, just a plain recital of facts; He was always gentle with sinners. And she made no defence or excuse.

Then—strangest of all—Our Lord discussed religion with this ignorant schismatic. And finally He revealed Himself to this illiterate woman as He could not do to the Jerusalem Rabbi. Simple souls come nearer to Jesus than great scholars. She left Him, not weighing pros and cons, but loudly confessing her sin, proclaiming her faith and summoning the villagers. Surely the most unexpected embassy He ever employed!

For the rest of her life, she would carry the remembrance of Jesus. For, though knowing her sin, He had treated her with respect, He had sought her out and called her to a better life. She knew now that He had been speaking of heavenly water. She did not tell her people of a new source of spring water, she did not even raise the question of the holy mount. Jesus had come into her life and filled her with joy and zeal. We too can—like St. Teresa of Avila and St. Thérèse—echo her prayer: "Give me this water."



## The Stooping Woman

Luke 13. 10-17.

ONE Sabbath-day, when Our Lord was preaching in a synagogue, He noticed particularly one member of the congregation: a woman, most probably aged, who sat bent double, unable to raise her head. She must have been devout "to come to church" in spite of her serious disablement. It was lucky for her that she did so on this day.

There is no indication that she knew Jesus or that she had learnt that He was to be present that day. She accepted her affliction as permanent and incurable, probably with resignation, though currently many good people regarded her as being punished for her sin. Our Lord felt pity for this poor sufferer. With an insight, possessed in a lesser degree by many saints, He read the story of her eighteen years of bondage.

When He had finished speaking, He called out to her and she shuffled forward. "Woman," He said to her, "your infirmity is cured." She could hardly believe it. So "He laid His hands upon her." "At once she straightened herself up. And she began to thank God."

The woman was not possessed. Luke's phrase "a spirit of infirmity" does not imply this; nor does Our Lord's metaphor of Satan's blinding mean more than one of the ills to which flesh is heir. Our Lord laid His hands on her, which He did not do for demoniacs. She was obviously a quiet, inoffensive

creature whose only affliction was her abnormal curvature. This was probably a case of chronic osteitis of the vertebrae; static kyphosis not infrequent among women engaged in hard agricultural labour.

The warden or presiding officer stood up and made a curious announcement: "There are six days on which ye may work. On these days come for a cure, but not on the Sabbath." He preached at both Christ and the woman, without having the courage to address them directly. Our Lord vigorously intervened, accepting full responsibility; the quarrel was with Him, not with the people.

He did not defend the alleged breach of the Sabbath. He denied that He had broken it. For where, even in the strictest sabbatarian code, was the "work" done? No medicaments, no anointing or bandaging, no burden lifted or carried. The woman just straightened her spine!

Jesus turned the tables on these pious sabbatarians: "Does not each of you on the Sabbath unhitch from the stable his ox or his ass and lead them to water?" Their property being concerned, they had no scruple in loosing an animal, which had been tied up for only a few hours, in order to "cure" it of its brief thirst. Christ continued: "Yet here is a woman, a daughter of Abraham, tied up by Satan for eighteen years. So was it not right to free her from her impediment on the Sabbath?" The argument was unanswerable. "His critics became ashamed and all the people expressed their delight."

It is curious how the miraculous element in this scene has a quite subordinate status. St. Luke's primary interest in the incident is to give us a typical instance of Christ's treatment of His sabbatarian opponents. These latter treat the miracle as if it were an affair of medical practice which they cannot explain. For them the issue was the Sabbath-law,

There is more than antiquarian interest in this debate. Modern sabbatarians indeed hardly go as far as their Jewish predecessors. But there is more to it than that. Does not this synagogue-warden exhibit in an extreme form an attitude sometimes adopted by good religious people? Concentration on the meticulous observance of pious practices to the detriment of natural values and human duties. Our Lord recalls to us the primacy of love and service—even to the least of His sisters.

## The Woman who touched Christ

Mat. 9. 10-12. Mark 5. 21-34.

Luke 8. 43-48.

OUR LORD was on His way through Capharnaum to cure the daughter of the synagogue-warden. A curious crowd accompanied Him, jostling Him in the narrow streets. Among them, but unknown to them, was a woman who had been suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years and could obtain no relief from physicians.

She was in a sorry plight; she was almost a leper; unclean by Jewish law, she could not even enter the synagogue. She knew that Jesus healed ailments by the laying-on of hands. But she did not dare expect this from Him, for contact with her conveyed ritual uncleanness.

Then she thought: "If only I touch His garment I shall get well." Elbowing her way, she crept up behind, and furtively touched a tassel in His shawl. Instantly she had the physical sensation—so often described by the cured at Lourdes—of being suddenly healed.

She slipped back among the crowd; full of joy but anxious to avoid notice, for she had violated a taboo and the Prophet might be indignant if He knew. She imagined that she had stolen a cure without His knowing it.

But Jesus stopped and looked around. "Who has touched Me?" He asked. The Apostles were impatient at the delay; their whole attention was concentrated on the important cure

of Rabbi Jair's daughter. Even good people may grow one-sided in their zeal and become subconsciously biased by lower motives.

But the heart of Christ had room for this other suppliant, this lowly woman shrinking under religious ostracism. He knew all about her without being told. So He held up the procession and asked His question. To Peter it seemed a ridiculous query. With his usual bluntness he expostulated: "You see the crowd pressing on You all round. And yet You ask: 'Who has touched Me?'"

How true! All down the ages a multitude, friendly or hostile, has been crowding round the Figure of the Nazarene. Many throng Him, but not all touch Him; not everyone interested in Him experiences the virtue which comes from Him.

Some half-superstitious old woman saying her prayers may get nearer Christ than learned exegetes and critics. "It must not be forgotten," says Cardinal Newman in his *Fla Milla*, "that Our Lord Himself on one occasion passed over the superstitious act of a woman who was in great trouble, for the merit of the faith which was the real element in it."

Trembling with fright, the woman came forward, prostrated herself, and told her story. She knew now that she had not been cured by magical emanation or mere physical contact. Her open acknowledgement—probably her first and last public speech—restored her self-respect, for Jesus thought it worth while to stop and to listen to her recital.

He acted not only in the interest of the woman but of woman-kind. For the incident was used by Church authorities as a charter of freedom from Levitical restrictions for the women of Christendom. "Daughter," He said, "it is your faith that has cured you. Go in peace."

## The Pagan's Repartee

Mat. 15, 21-28.

Mark 7, 24-30.

Tired of continual opposition and desirous of a quiet period for training the Apostles, Our Lord retired towards the coastal strip north-west of Palestine, occupied by the remnants of the Canaanites (whom the Greeks called Phœnicians). Here He hoped to remain incognito.

But a native woman—a pagan, but not necessarily an idolater—had discovered His identity, for He was known to many of these neighbours of the Galileans. As He was quietly entering a house, she rushed up and began loud cries: "Lord, Son of David, have pity on me." She had learnt this messianic title from the Jews, and Jesus presently reminded her that His mission was to the Jews.

In begging mercy for herself, she was making her child's sufferings her own. It was a mother's appeal for her daughter, whose sickness she regarded as a demonic affliction. We have a natural sympathy with her. Our Lord was not indifferent; surely, on this as on other occasions, He was touched by a mother's grief. "But He did not answer a word."

Why this unusual, seemingly harsh, attitude to a suppliant? He had come here for quiet and rest. He did not wish a crowd to collect or to be besieged by sufferers. But the serious difficulty was that a ministry of healing in heathen territory would have ruined His influence with the Jews, especially as

they were particularly hostile to these pagans on the Syrian coast. The early Church was nearly split over the problem of admitting Gentiles.

Could He prudently make an exception for this woman? He adopted the strategy of silence, which was a tacit encouragement. And He resolved to safeguard Himself by placing this principle on record.

The disciples then came up. They were very annoyed to find this woman disturbing their vacation and making such a nuisance of herself. They addressed the Master who appeared to be too acquiescent: "Send her away, for she keeps screaming after us." They felt no compassion for this heathen. Did they ask Jesus to grant her petition, just as one might toss a copper to an unfortunate beggar? This is improbable. Send the five thousand away, send the little children away, send blind Bar-Timaeus away; and now send this vociferous female away.

Our Lord explained to them His attitude: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." Then turning to the woman, now prostrate before Him, He said: "The children must first be satisfied. It would not be fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the pet dogs." (It was only pagans who had such house and pet dogs; the Jews had only scavenging street-dogs.) The answer seems harsh; but she did not so take it. She busily accepted her subordinate place; she fully admitted that the favour she requested was a gratuitous grace and not a right. Thus she vindicated the principle of Our Lord's ministry which He was concerned to assert.

Quick-witted, she saw the opening given to her. "Yes, Lord," she answered. "But even the pet dogs under the table feed on the children's scraps." And this is exactly what Christ meant; meal-time for the dogs would come when the children had done. She, like the puppies, claimed to be regarded

as part of the household. Thus she was the first to express the seed-thought of the mission to us Gentiles, as she was the first of us to cry *Eyrie Elion* to Our Lord.

Jesus was humanly delighted to have His seeming rebuff flung back at Him in a passionate plea for mercy. The paralytic's friends broke through the roof; the blind man at Jericho shouted down the disciples. One might almost say that this pagan woman triumphed over Christ Himself. "Great is your faith," He said. "For saying that, you may go home." Her daughter was cured—at a distance.

From this incident we learn to persevere in prayer in spite of discouragement and seeming failure. We see too how Christ left it to His Church to decide the question of the mission to non-Jews.

We also learn to appreciate Our Lord's attitude towards those who in good faith are "outside the Church." Notwithstanding the invitation of the Apostles, He heard this heathen woman's prayer by way of exception. God's covenanted mercies are based on certain easy conditions; those who do not fulfil them, must not reckon upon God's favours. But these conditions do not tie God. He is free to distribute His graces as He chooses.



## Mothers and Children

Mat. 19. 13-15.      Mark 10. 13-16,  
 Luke 18. 15-17.

On one occasion some mothers brought their children to Our Lord so that He might lay His hands on them and bless them. They must have been a noisy group: clamouring mothers with infants in arms, shrill-voiced little boys scampering about on the edge of Christ's audience. Why, it was just as if nowadays children were chattering and crying during a sermon!

The disciples resented this intrusion on serious missionary work. So they scolded the children and tried to "shoo" them away. Had not the Apostles a good deal of right on their side? Probably, however, their action was not altogether due to anxiety to spare the Master from interruption and annoyance. Their attitude showed some of the current indifference to, or contempt for, women and children, and a sense of self-importance.

Jesus Himself took a different view. Interrupting His teaching, He expressed great displeasure with His disciples. "Let the little children come to Me," He said, "and do not keep preventing them. For to such belongs the Kingdom of God."

So the children swarmed round Him; they had reverence and affection for Him, but no fear or distrust. Our Lord was seated, the youngsters standing. With His left arm round each

boy in turn, He laid His right hand in blessing on the head of each.

There is hardly anything in the Gospels which so reveals Our Lord's uniqueness as a religious teacher. One could not imagine Socrates acting thus. A curse of the pagan world was infanticide, the exposure of unwanted children; approved by Plato and Aristotle; combated by the early Christians; revised, slightly disguised, in our modern world. Even the Jewish religious leaders despised the uneducated and the immature. Christianity ushered in a new spirit of tenderness.

Our Lord's declaration, "Let the little children come to Me," was never so relevant and important as it is to-day, when there is such a widespread organized effort to "condition" youth away from and against Christ. Catholic education is the most vital issue for us in contemporary life. Parents can ponder the appeal of Jesus, and bring their children not only to be touched by Him but to receive Him into their souls.

Also that wonderful saying that God's Kingdom belongs to the childlike contains a lesson very apposite to present-day mentality, in which, through specialisms and techniques, the capacity for the divine is so weakened. We must become little before God. "Unless you again become little children, you will not enter the Kingdom of God."

How consoling is Our Lord's attitude! He was displeased, not with the obstreperous mothers, not with the clamouring children, but with His own zealous Apostles. Had they succeeded in their action, not only would the mothers have been disappointed and discouraged, but the incident would have been misinterpreted later as if children were incapable of receiving sacramental grace. And He did not bless the little ones as mass; He welcomed each one individually. To Him each of us is unique; He calls His own sheep by name. No

one—saint or Apostle—can stand between any one of us and Jesus.

[The same lesson is conveyed in another incident. After accepting Jesus as Messiah, the Apostles, while on a journey, began an acrimonious dispute about priority of status in the messianic kingdom which they expected to be soon inaugurated. Our Lord knew what was happening behind His back. So, on arriving at their destination, He called a child, whom He stationed in front of the disciples. Placing His arms round the child, He addressed them: "Arise, I say to you, unless ye again become like little children, ye will not even enter the kingdom of heaven. For there the greatest is he who, like this little child, makes little of himself" (Matthew 18, 3). This was Our Lord's vivid answer to the ugly exhibition of ambition and jealousy. He completely rejected a militantly nationalist religion. To conquer the world, He was recruiting, not leaders and soldiers, not even grown-ups, but men who had reverted to childlike faith and simplicity. The gates of the kingdom, resistant to the summons of the mighty, swung back at the touch of a child. Thus God confounds the learned and the strong (I Cor. 1, 26).

Notice that it was the Apostles, His chief missionaries, whom Our Lord told to become little children once more. "It is possible to remain little, even when in the most responsible offices and when living to a great age."—St. Therese in *Notations Paroles*.]

## The Bereaved Widow

Luke 7. 11-17.

Coming one day from Capernaum, Jesus, after a tiring journey of about twenty-five miles, reached, in the evening, a village called Nain. There He met a funeral procession emerging from the gate of the village. Passers-by were expected to join a funeral. Barefoot bearers were carrying a bier on their shoulders. The corpse was not in a closed coffin but in an open wickerwork basket. Mourning women followed, singing a piercing dirge, perhaps using cymbals.

It was a melancholy scene in the dusk. But the most tragic figure was the grieving widow, the mother of the dead youth who was her only son. In the ancient world the position of a widow was precarious and often pitiful. As the Jews married young, the father also must have died at a comparatively early age. The Jews currently attributed premature death—like suffering and sickness—to sin. So the poor mother was not only now in penury but under a religious stigma.

No wonder that "when the Lord saw her, His heart was touched." He too was an only son, and His Mother was a widow. His long years spent in a village made Him tenderly sympathetic towards poor widows. He went up to her and said: "Do not be weeping." He laconically told her to dry her tears. From an ordinary sympathiser the advice would be abrupt and unusual. Jesus quickly justified Himself.

He then went and put His hand on the stretcher. Wondering at the gesture, the bearers halted and laid it on the ground. No one expected what happened next. Those who accompanied Him from Capernaum had indeed seen many wonderful cures. But this is Death. This youth is not just a sick man; he has crossed the great gulf between this world and the next.

In the ensuing silence—even the mourners ceased their laments—His voice suddenly rang out. He spoke, yes, He spoke to the corpse. As simply and naturally as He spoke to the mother, and even more authoritatively. Probably just two words: *Tal'ya kam*: Young man, get up! The man who had been a corpse sat up and began to talk. The majestic command had resounded in the silent realm of the dead.

This is one of the rare instances of Christ performing a miracle unasked. No one expected or requested His intervention; but pain and grief spoke eloquently to Him. We are told the motive: human and filial compassion for the widowed mother. Perhaps, directly or indirectly, the story came to St. Luke from Our Lady. It was symbolical of her own bereavement and of the restoration of her only Son to her through the Resurrection.

From other cases we might have expected that the marvellously reanimated youth would have left home and joined Jesus in His missionary journeys. What good he could have done as a living witness of the Master's powers! But no! "He gave him back to his mother." Natural law showed that his place was by the side of his widowed mother. (So Canon Law to-day says that a child with such an obligation must be refused admission to a religious community.)

This incident shows us that Our Lord always has time for the individual, however obscure, and that He has sympathy with grief and sorrow. True, He does not now intervene

miraculously to restore life to a dear departed. Yet we learn that He *could* do so. But death is God's decision for each of us. Even the youth of Nain had to die a few years later.

But Christ is awaiting us, one day He will dry our tears. Death does not mean separation from Him. To die, says St. Paul, is to be "in Christ." "Neither death nor life . . . can separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ Our Lord" (Rom. 8. 38).

## The Generous Widow

Mark 12. 41-44. Luke 21. 1-4.

One day Our Lord, probably tired, sat down under the colonnade surrounding what was called the women's court in the Temple of Jerusalem. He was facing the thirteen trumpet-shaped alms-boxes placed there for voluntary offerings. He watched the worshippers making their contributions. Among them there were many rich Jews ostentatiously giving large sums.

Then there furtively came a poor widow with her humble offering. She put two little bronze coins (called *perutahs*) into an alms-chest. It was the minimal offering; one such coin was not accepted. The two coins were worth one-forty-eighth of a labourer's daily wage. What a trivial incident to be recorded for millions to read down the centuries, when so many once far-famed events have passed into oblivion!

Jesus was interested in this feeble pauper-woman. No one else took any notice. The Apostles hardly observed her at all; they were interested in the important people, they were admiring the large gifts. Our Lord called them over to Him and said: "This poor widow has contributed more than any of the others." At first the Apostles did not think He was serious; He seemed to be contradicting the evidence of their eyes. They did not realise that Heaven's arithmetic is quite different from ours.

So Christ explained: "They all made offerings to God out of their superfluities. But she in her poverty contributed all that she had to live on." Objectively her tiny contribution was not much use to the Temple; the collection of such coins was almost more trouble than they were worth. But to her they meant her supper. She would have to earn her next meal by some menial ill-paid service. Her act of devotion to God's service involved real self-sacrifice.

Had she consulted the Apostles, they would have told her that she would be acting foolishly and imprudently in leaving herself penniless. So Christ's encomium seemed rather paradoxical to them. He gave similar praise to Mary of Bethany, whom the same disciples criticised for wasteful generosity. Her jar of perfume was worth more than 14,000 times the widow's offering. In each case Our Lord declared: she did what she could, she gave what she had. Not the quantity but the quality, not the external amount but the interior love and sacrifice. Such is God's valuation.

This dumb, lonely widow did not know that she was being lovingly watched by God in human form. They never met. He did not speak to her. He gave her no word of encouragement nor did He offer her shame; she would have been embarrassed. Her name and her deed are recorded in the book of life. Her farthing is made equal to Mary's costly spikenard.

How consoling is this simple scene to us, ordinary folk whose lives are filled with unspectacular routine. Sometimes we are tempted to think that Jesus is preoccupied with mighty heroic souls, and that our little lives are unperceived. But that is the view, once held by the disciples, which this incident is designed to dissipate. Nothing is too small or insignificant for Him who sees in secret and numbers the very hairs of our head. This poor anonymous widow made as great a contribution



as the rich Mary of Bethany. For she put into her humbly insignificant offering not only her whole living but her whole soul. It is the spiritual, not the material, content which counts in God's sight. Spiritually "the widow's mite" is represented by every aspiration or gossamer, every unnoticed little act of self-sacrifice, offered wholeheartedly to God.

[Let us illustrate from this simple incident how, without artificial forcing, we can select spiritual themes for our meditation. (1) The attitude of the Apostles, watching the rich doze. Even good people in dealing with souls may be led to adopt worldly criteria. (2) Our Lord's selection of this poor charwoman. It was an obscure anonymous widow who alone merited His encomium. (3) The paradoxical accountancy of heaven. This trivial act of dropping two little coins had an eternal repercussion. As it did not escape the loving notice of Jesus, so surely it was recorded in the book of life, registered to her credit in heaven. (4) The objectively unimportant act derived its great spiritual valuation from the fact that it was inspired by personal devotion and involved self-sacrifice.]

## A Woman in Sin

John 8. 3-58.

ONE morning while Our Lord was seated on the ground or on a small stool, and teaching in the Temple courts, He was interrupted by a sudden commotion.<sup>1</sup> A group of Rabbis and Pharisees were dragging a struggling woman—probably a young girl—"who had been caught in adultery." There was no excuse for brutally hauling her in person into the sacred precincts, if they merely wanted to consult Him on the issue. Incidentally, where was her accomplice, who was subject to the same penalty in the Mosaic code?

They addressed Jesus: "Moses commanded us to stone such a woman. So what do You say?" This was not a request for a decision—the Law was too explicit—but for executing the verdict. It would seem then that the Sanhedrin had already tried and condemned her. Was the sentence to be carried out? The reference to stoning (not strangulation) suggests that the girl was merely betrothed.

Now the enforcement of the death-penalty in such cases had long since fallen into disuse, partly through laxity, partly because the Romans had reserved the death-penalty to themselves. But Jewish sticklers for the Law, like the Pharisees, chafed under this restriction which they had to accept as a fact

<sup>1</sup> This passage, though part of Scripture, probably does not belong to the Gospel of St. John. It is written in the Luke's style. It seems to have shocked many early Christians, as it is well shown a condensation of it.

while denying Rome's right to usurp this authority. Now, in virtue of His messianic claims, Jesus, they thought, would not dare to abrogate formally the Mosaic Law. So He might be expected to revive the obsolete penalty, which hot-headed nationalists would proceed to carry out. Thus He would be seriously embroiled with the Roman authorities.

On the other hand He was notoriously lenient on sinners. He met tax-collectors and prostitutes, He claimed the power to forgive sins. So He might be induced to exonerate the girl, to acquiesce in Rome's abrogation of the Law. This would seriously injure His status and lessen His influence with religious and nationalist Jews.

Thus the poor woman dragged publicly before Him was not merely a controversial case, she was the pretext for a trap. Their chief motive was not zeal for public morals; their design was to place Him in a dilemma. Knowing this, He ignored them. He stooped down and with His finger made figures in the dust. A forger would have told us that He inscribed their sins, but the Gospel is silent and men have ever since been trying to decipher what He wrote. Probably it was merely a gesture to indicate that He was ashamed of their hypocrisy, their callous treatment of the culprit, the publicity given to the scandal.

But as they persisted in questioning Him, He looked up at them and said: "If there is one among you free from sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."

Under Mosaic Law, the onus of executing the sentence lay on them, the witnesses, not on Him. He plainly hinted that the abeyance of the penalty was primarily due to the laxity of public morals. He implied also that by their spiritual sins they were worse than she. They felt naked, they realised that all their own sins were exposed to His gaze. They began to slink away, as He calmly resumed His writing.

Only He and she were left. She remained, though she could have gone away; perhaps her conscience was beginning to speak to her. He looked up at her. "Has no one carried on the sentence on you?" He asked her. "No one, Sir," she replied. "Neither will I sentence you," He said. "Go now and do not sin again."

He did not say, as on other occasions: Your sin has been forgiven. Perhaps He wished to avoid what would appear to be a formal abrogation of the Mosaic code. More probably the girl had been temporarily hardened by her brutal treatment and public shame. But, while not condoning the sin, He was gentle with the sinner. He did not despair of her; He gave her not only hope but strength not to fall again into sin. We may be sure that, as she went away, the dignified friendly attitude of Jesus began to efface the scars left by the humiliating brutality of her earthly judges, and full repentance came.

[We can appreciate how in early times this incident appeared so liable to misinterpretation, when we read in a modern writer (H. G. Wells): "Christ, it is manifest was of the modern Faith in these matters; He welcomed the Magdalen, neither would He condemn the woman taken in adultery."]

## A Penitent Sinner

Luke 7. 36-50.

Religious leaders (Pharisees) sometimes invited Our Lord to dinner. Women did not dine with men. But on one such occasion a woman, who had been converted by Him, entered the dining-room and stood behind His feet.<sup>1</sup> She was "a sinner in the city," i.e. probably in Jerusalem. We must not exaggerate this statement or read into it that she was "a lady of easy virtue." The Pharisees flung the epithet "sinner" at any non-practising Jew. But Christ Himself admitted that this woman had committed "many sins." What they were we simply do not know. But the presence of a notorious harlot would hardly have been tolerated.

The ordinary people squatted at meals, as Our Lord must have done for years in Nazareth. But better-off Jews had adopted the Greco-Roman custom of reclining on couches, leaning on the left elbow, with feet pointing outwards from the central table. Standing behind Jesus, and listening to Him, she was overcome by emotion: sorrow mingled with gratitude. Noticing that her hot tears had bedewed His feet, she, with unconventional boldness, loosened her hair and used it to wipe His feet which—she noticed—His host had left dusty and unwashed. Then she recollected her chief errand; she had

<sup>1</sup> In my *Family at Bethany* (1949) I have given my reasons for identifying this sinful woman with Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalen.

brought a flask of perfume. (Oil and perfume were, and are, used extensively in the warm East.) So she humbly kissed and then perfumed His feet.

Simon, the host, watching secretly and superciliously, observed that Jesus accepted the woman's homage. If He were a genuine man of God, thought Simon, He would have known about this woman and spurned her very touch. The Pharisee made two mistakes. He did not know the penitent and pardoned soul of the erstwhile sinner as Jesus did. And he thought that his Guest had no insight into character. But Our Lord decided to show that He even knew what Simon was silently thinking.

Without rudeness or direct vindication, Jesus proceeded to tell a little story which, by seeming irrelevant, would win the Pharisee's impersonal agreement. A man had two debtors, one owing 500 dinars and the other 50. (A dinar was a labourer's daily wage.) As they were both insolvent, he cancelled the two debts. Which one of the pair will show more gratitude? That is an easy one, thought Simon. He answered at once: The one who owed more. Correct, said Our Lord.

Then suddenly turning round, He pointed to the woman whom Simon was studiously ignoring. "Do you see this woman?" He asked. Then, by contrasting the Pharisee and the sinner, He showed that, though seemingly passive, He had noticed the social mobility of the one and the unsolicited homage of the other. No customary embrace from His host on arrival; but she imprinted kisses on His feet. No water to wash His dusty feet; but she bedewed them with her tears. No sprinkling of aromatic essence on His head; but she perfumed His feet. Simon thought He did not mind; she thought He did not notice; both were wrong. He felt His host's neglect; He accepted His penitent's loving service as reparation

to His Sacred Heart. Simon thought he had done enough for the Nazarene by providing a good meal. But Jesus attached more value to the woman's tears than to the Pharisee's dinner. And He concluded: "She whose many sins have been forgiven has shown great love and gratitude; but he who had less to be forgiven shows less gratitude."

Only then did the obtuse Pharisee see the point of the parable.

Yes, she was the greater debtor; but both were bankrupt in the sight of God. This devout, tithe-paying Pharisee was shocked at the idea that he was unable to pay his way with God. He lacked the sense of sin. It is often the peril of good people to be self-righteous, harsh towards those with greater temptations, intolerant of grosser sins to which they are not prone. Let us hope that Simon learnt the lesson.

Then Jesus addressed the woman: "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." The guests, who had resented this extravagant and demonstrative intruder, were now horrified that she got off so easily, that Jesus should impart God's pardon to her. From the staid religious standpoint these practising Jews had a good case against this sinful woman who lacked education and self-restraint and had made a public nuisance of herself. But Jesus was openly on her side, for, in spite of failings and falls, she felt the need of Him, she had humility, she was capable of utmost devotion. She, and not Simon, should be our model.

## The Sisters at Home

Luke 10, 39-42.

THIS charming little scene might, in modern terms, be called "afternoon tea at Bethany." "Martha welcomed Him to her house." Her sister Mary was also there. Evidently they had both been friends and followers of Jesus for some time. Without encroaching on due respect, they can dispense with formalities, they need not conceal little domestic differences from their Guest.

Mary, probably after helping her sister to prepare a simple meal, came and "sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what He was saying." She was a disciple, just as Paul sat "at the feet" of his teacher Gamaliel. Probably never before had she been treated as a person, with spiritual and intellectual consideration, by a religious teacher. She foreshadowed the great women saints of Christianity, especially unlettered women who reached the highest spirituality.

Martha kept more to the traditional pattern of woman's status. Practical and efficient, she worked in the kitchen, determined to entertain their Friend royally. Being a good cook and caterer, she felt that she could in this way best express her devotion. Trying with difficulty to cook in the kitchen and to listen to Our Lord speaking in the next room, she began to get irritated and to nurse a sense of grievance. That since of hers always at her devotions, while she was managing the house! She could stand it no longer.



Bouncing into the parlour, she complained Mary to the Master: "Lord, surely You don't approve of my sister letting me do all the housework. Please tell her to lend me a hand." In general, quite a reasonable request. But not, He thought, on this occasion. "Martha, Martha," He replied, playfully repeating her name and taking the sting out of His gentle rebuke. "You fuss too much; you are anxious about many things. Only a few are required—or only one." The immediate meaning seems clear. He does not want an elaborate meal, one dish or course would be quite enough. He did not condemn Martha for attending to the household tasks; but she was overdoing it this time.

Smilingly He told Martha that there was a more important aspect of His visit than cooking and eating. "Mary," He said, "has chosen the better portion, and it must not be taken from her." Jokingly He declared that Mary had chosen a better dish than any that Martha could produce from the kitchen. This was tantamount to an invitation to Martha to join Himself and Mary. How simple and intimate was the relation between Our Lord and His two friends.

It is from this homely atmosphere that we must start before we try to construct any heavy theological structure. The exquisite little scene is itself a lesson to us. It shows us how informal, considerate and accessible Our Lord was with His friends, when He could get away from preaching and controversy. His words have a natural and clear meaning. Doubtless, here as on other occasions, there was a deeper significance underlying them, a principle of general application. Especially to-day, when there is danger not of too many Marys but of too many Marthas. Because "Jesus loved Martha," He wished to free her from obsession with household drudgery—even when done for His sake—and to teach her to have a right

concept of work as subordinate to spiritual values. Even the humblest soul has the right, as well as the need, to sit sometimes at the feet of Jesus.

It is an exaggeration to regard Martha and Mary as exemplifying the active and the contemplative life. The sisters were not so different as that; and the contrast implied is more characteristic of Platonist philosophy than of Christianity. Martha was not reprehended for her domestic service nor was she excluded from listening to Christ. And Mary was not exhorted to sit for ever at His feet. If one represented the kitchen and the other the chapel, both are necessary for Christian life.

[St. Teresa, *Way of Perfection* (17): "Martha was a saint, though she is not said to be contemplative. Now what do you desire more than to be able to resemble this blessed woman, who deserved so often to entertain Christ Our Lord in her house? Had she been, like Blessed Magdalen, always absorbed, there would have been no-one to provide food for the divine Guest. Imagine then that this community is the house of St. Martha, which must have something of everything. And let not those who have been led along the active way envy those who are engulfed in contemplation."]

## 50

### The Bereaved Sisters

*John 11, 1-38.*

BETWEEN His final visit to Jerusalem, Our Lord was hiding in Transjordania from the Sanhedrin; He was, we might say, "on the run." But at Bethany (two miles from Jerusalem) the two sisters knew His whereabouts. For when their brother fell ill, they sent this secret message: "Your friend is sick." What a beautiful love-spoken relative, so eloquently brief: information, no petition. None of them, not even the sick man, wished to endanger or even inconvenience their Friend.

He sent back an enigmatic reply which probably reached them only after their brother's death: "This sickness is not mortal. It is for God's glory; through it the Son of God will be glorified." What a perplexing answer, what a trial to their faith and love! Jesus deliberately subjected His friends to this purifying ordeal. We all have such experiences when God seems far-off and His promises appear to be belied.

The messenger reached Our Lord in the evening and left next morning for Bethany. Jesus did not return with him, but on the following day He said to His disciples: "Let us go back to Judea." He consulted them for He knew their reluctance to return to the danger-zone. They protested against such an imprudent proposal. He assured them that His time had not yet come. They seem already to have forgotten the plight of their friends in Bethany. So He said: "Our friend Lazarus is sleeping, but I am going back to wake him

up." Jesus must have smiled at their obtuse literalness when they answered: "Lord, if he can sleep, he will recover." So He said plainly: "Lazarus has died. So let us go back to him."

They were still reluctant to return to danger. Why this journey of thirty miles to see a dead man? They saw, however, that He would go alone if they refused to accompany Him. Confering together, they had almost decided to let Him down, when Thomas intervened: "Let us go back and die with Him!" Now—as later after the Resurrection—Thomas refused to busy himself up with what he considered optimistic illusion. Jesus did not disabuse him of his unfounded fear. It was only many years later that the Apostle did die for his Master in far-off India.

Martha, confident that He would come when He could, had posted a look-out outside the village. When His arrival was reported to her, she sped to meet Him. "Lord," she cried, "if You had been here, my brother would not have died." She expressed regret, not complaint, and a touching confidence in His loving help. Then she added: "But even now I know that God will give You whatever You ask Him." The idea that Lazarus could have been cured from a distance, or that he could now be raised from the grave, never crossed Martha's head. Her brother, seemingly young and unmarried, had died prematurely. Current Jewish belief was that such a fate was due to sin, and therefore the deceased was in *Sheol* (like our Purgatory) and not admitted to Paradise. Martha, believing that Jesus' power reached beyond the grave, uttered the first recorded prayer to and through Christ for a dear departed one. She asked Jesus to intervene with God to secure Lazarus' forgiveness and transfer to Paradise.

Our Lord's assurance that her brother would rise did not console Martha. Nor did she grasp the full implication of the

solemn assurance that He was Resurrection and Life. But she made a wonderful confession of humble faith: "Yea, Lord, I believe that You are the Messiah, the Son of God, the One destined to come into the world."

Martha then slipped away to take her sister's place among the mourners. "The Master is here," she whispered, "and He is calling for you." Mary came quickly and threw herself at His feet, where she had so often sat and learnt. "Lord," she sobbed, "if You had been here, my brother would not have died." The same words as Martha's, the expression of their common grief. Mary was more emotionally disturbed than her sister, she was loudly weeping. She was in no condition to conduct a conversation such as He had with Martha. Besides, the mourners had followed Mary, thinking she was visiting the grave; so there was no privacy. Our Lord did not speak, but He "silently wept." The tears of Jesus contain a whole theology. He did not resent this sisterly grief as unspiritual, He did not consider that devotion to Him was to extinguish all natural human love. Let us, especially when bereaved, lovingly look on this picture of Jesus shedding tears in unison with His two sorrow-stricken friends, Martha and Mary.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For the continuation of the scene see No. 12.

## Why this Waste?

Mat. 26. 6-13. Mark 14. 3-9.

John 12. 1-11.

ABOUT a week before PASSOVER, when Our Lord arrived at Bethany, there was a reception in His honour. Prominent among the guests was the recently resuscitated Lazarus. The only thing we are told about him is that he was at this dinner party! It is only in later legend that he is represented as making speeches about the other world.

Martha—who may have been the hostess—took charge of the catering. Simon gave his house, Lazarus was a living and grateful witness, Martha contributed her domestic skill. And Mary?

She could not sit at His feet and listen privately; she was not very competent in the kitchen and would be in Martha's way. She had to do something. Over there she spied her brother whom she had awaited for burial a little while ago.

More quick-witted than the Apostles she had sadly divined Our Lord's hints about His near end. She decided on a farewell anointing. How fortunate for her, for she was too late on Easter Sunday morning.

She came in with a flask of costly perfume. Breaking its slender neck, she poured some on His head—a natural and accepted gesture in the East. Recalling her first encounter with Him as a sobbing penitent, she also impulsively poured

perfume—as once she shed tears—on His feet. Then, loosening her hair, she wiped them.

The frugal disciples were shocked. Their treasurer Judas became their spokesman: "Why this waste?" The perfume should have been sold, and the proceeds put in the common fund for the poor. At a post-mortem audit, it was subsequently discovered that Judas had been guilty of peculation. So to-day a utilitarian creed of strict economy is often voiced by men who are more interested in profits than in charity or social service.

Our Lord, whose approving acquiescence was implicitly criticised, came to the rescue of the silent Mary. "Let her alone," He said. "Why are ye interfering with her?" He gratefully accepted her "beautiful action," meant to anticipate His sepulchral anointing.

He declared that her deed would be recorded "in memory of her" throughout the world. And so it has been, by His express desire. It has been enshrined for ever in the Gospel and in our hearts. The action was for Jesus Himself, but its fragrance has spread into the lives of us all.

A lesson for all time. Why this waste? Why waste time on prayer, why disperse energy on religion, why spend money on churches? Yet mere humanitarianism would be self-defeating, for it would dry up the inner springs of social action. To deprive men of contact with Christ would in the end brutalise the world and leave men defenceless against sordid selfishness.

On this very occasion Our Lord sadly remarked that He would not be long with them: "But you will always have the poor among you." And He had told them that whatever they did for His lowliest brother or sister He would take as done for Himself. On every such act He repeats Mary's exclamation: You have done a beautiful deed for Me. It is this inspiration,

this devotion to His Person shown by Mary, which down the ages has evoked heroic service to man; and not the calculations of an accountant such as Judas.

[The evidence is very convincing that, though this banquet is different from that described in Luke 7 (see No. 48), the woman is the same. (The only alternative would be to assume that Mary gave a theatrical imitation of the first woman's performance.) For the gestures were most unusual and otherwise inexplicable: Perfuming the feet (not merely the head); unbinding the hair in public (considered immodest); wiping perfume (not tears) from the feet (though a towel was now available). Surely a touching repetition, now in loving silence, of what she had once done, in remorse and tears; a farewell memorial thanksgiving to the divine Guest who had changed her life.

And once more Jesus defended her, this time against the Apostles; as formerly against the Pharisee, and later against her sister. Our Lord thus upheld and consecrated devotion to Himself, against the sophistical arguments of conventionalism, activism and humanitarianism. Had the perfume been sold for the apostolic treasury, we should never have heard of this incident. But Our Lord directed that Mary's reckless devotion should be regarded as part of His Gospel message. And the recital of her act has perfumed our lives.]



## The Lost Sheep

Luke 15. 1-7.

"Now all the tax-collectors and the sinners kept conversing with Him to listen to Him. But the Pharisees and the rabbis took umbrage. Why—they asked—does He welcome sinners and take meals with them?" These critics could understand calling these sinners to a better life or denouncing their sins; but not seeking them out and associating with them as friends and equals.

In reply Our Lord adduced an incident from pastoral life. "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep. If he loses one of them, does he not leave the other ninety-nine on the pasture-land and go after the lost one until he finds it?" The owner leaves the rest of his flock guarded or in a hurdle and sets off in search of the stray sheep. He goes himself, instead of sending a servant. When he finds it, weak and tired, he does not punish it or drive it before him, "he joyfully brings it back on his shoulders." On arriving home he calls his friends and neighbours together and says to them: "Celebrate with me, for I have found my lost sheep."

Perhaps the action of the flock-owner is more devoted and enthusiastic than in real life. But he is meant to portray Jesus Himself. The figure will always be conjoined with that of the Good Shepherd in St. John's Gospel. The virtue of repentance is probed in rabbinic literature. But, says a Jewish scholar

(Montefiore), "the good shepherd, who searches for the lost sheep and reclains it and rejoices over it, is a new figure which has never ceased to play its great part in the moral and religious development of the world." Neither rabbi nor disciple could then have understood the full reality and pathos of this parable, until (in the words of Cardinal Wiseman) "the pursuit of the lost sheep had been made from Olivet to Sion and from Sion to Calvary, and the stray one had been seen borne up the toiling ascent upon shoulders bruised beneath the cross's load." As St. Ambrose said long before: "The shoulders of Christ are the arms of the cross. There I have laid my sins, on it I have found rest."

The lost sheep represents the sinners—those careless about moral or ritual laws—whom Jesus sought out and welcomed. The friends and neighbours are the hearers to whom He was telling the story and whom He asked to rejoice with Him. This appeal to the Pharisees has a perennial application. In the third century St. Dionysius, referring to good people who dealt harshly with sinners, complained that errant sheep were not being welcomed: "Let us not repel those who return, but gladly welcome them and number them with those who have not strayed."

Our Lord proceeded to declare that the joy of the Good Shepherd on earth was shared in heaven by God and the angels. Portraying spiritual realities in the language of human affairs, He said: "I say to you that similarly there will be joy in heaven over one repentant sinner rather than over ninety-nine good people who have no need of repentance." The joy spoken of is for any lost one, not necessarily a very fervent one, though in fact a converted sinner is often more fervent than the staid good. Nor may we deduce that the recovered one is loved or valued more than the ninety-nine. But the conversion is a fresh

source of joy, an added cause for rejoicing after preceding anxiety. Nor is it implied that there are good people who really do not need repentance. The Baptist appealed to all the people; he did not make an exception for persons like Nicodemus. But good people—and the Pharisees had many virtues—are subject to more subtle spiritual sins, the worst of which is disdain for "sinners," for those guilty of graver and more obvious vices.

When in this parable Our Lord, condescending to our temporal limitations, tells us that there is great "joy in heaven even over one repentant sinner," He is using, and thereby justifying, our language when we speak of reparation to His Sacred Heart for the unrepentant.

[Our Lord completes the picture when He designates Himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10). And so we have directions for every modern shepherd—priest, parent, teacher—of His little ones. The sheep are Christ's (not his); his duty is to care for them, to provide for their welfare, to lead (not drive) them to pasture. He must lovingly seek out those who have lost their way. He must protect them against evil influences: marauding robbers and rapacious wolves. The quality pictured in the shepherd is not brilliant intellect or special talent, but Christlike devotion and self-sacrifice.]

## 53

# The Two Sons

Levi 19. 11-21.

To justify His attitude to sinners, Our Lord told the story of a well-to-do farmer and his two sons. They were unmarried and worked on the farm; the elder, stout and hard-working, was, say, about twenty; the younger, gay but weak, was about seventeen. (But youths are very precocious in the East.) The younger asked his father for his legally assignable share. The elder did not claim his portion (double that of the other); he intended to continue working on the farm until his father would die or retire, when he would become the owner.

The father gave the younger his third share in the form of money, crops, cattle. He sold the goods for cash; and, with his father's blessing, he started off for foreign parts, probably Egypt. Palestine could not support all its population, so it was natural for a younger son to emigrate. He had enough capital to start a trade; he could settle down and marry a diaspora Jewess.

The young man was now his own master—"lord of himself, that heritage of woe." But the country boy was no match for city folk. He was led into dissipation and spent his money foolishly. He became penniless. He could have gone to the nearest Jewish community and asked for work. Instead, he obtained a job with a heathen, abandoning the practice of his religion: Sabbath, ritual eating, etc. Worst of all for a Jew, he was set to hard pigs; he took the work as there was a period

of general scarcity. "As he got nothing else to eat, he was glad enough to fill himself with the carb-beans" on which the pigs were feeding.

This picture of the younger son—representing the outcast group in Israel—was realistic enough to satisfy the Pharisees, who must have been pleased at this description of a profligate and a renegade. The listening sinners were given an unflattering portrait; their friend was not sentimental.

The youth's recovery was gradual and unheroic. Only when overwhelmed with misery and starvation, did he think of home: "In my father's house there are many casual labourers who have plenty of food, while here I am dying of hunger." Disillusioned, he started back along the road he had once so gaily trod. Surmounting the last hill-top, he saw in the distance the home of his birth—and a well-known figure. His father "ran and threw himself on his neck and kissed him" on the cheeks. "Father," he sobbed, "I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer worthy to be considered your son." True repentance at last. He did not blame the conditions in the foreign country, he did not excuse himself as the victim of bad companions or of hard luck. He confessed his sin; but the father had already forgiven him.

The spiritual counterpart keeps breaking through the story. An ordinary farmer would find it hard to forgive the disgrace brought on the family; he might have set the dogs on one who had abandoned morality and religion; at best he might hire him as a labourer. But the father, representing Jesus acting for God, desires the return of the sinner more than the sinner does; he is watching out for him, he runs to meet him, he gives him the kiss of reconciliation, he restores his status. All of which horrified the Pharisees and disturbs rigorous down the ages.

The story might have ended here, but Our Lord wished to portray the Pharisee as well as the sinner. The elder brother was in his way a good man, irreproachable but unlikable. He was out in the fields, looking after the farm. Hearing the sounds of revelry and music, he discovered that his brother's return was being celebrated. "Thereupon he was angry and refused to go in." The father came out to plead with him. The elder son protested against the reception of "this son of yours," contrasting his own life of obedience and hard work. He had pride in his own achievements and merciless condemnation for the penitent; he even disavowed brotherhood with the returning sinner.

The father, refraining from argument, made a touching appeal for love and unity to the recalcitrant youth: "Son, you have always been with me and all that I have will be yours. Yet we simply had to feast and celebrate, for this brother of yours was dead but has come to life again, he was lost but has been found."

The story ends in tragic suspense. The younger son was restored to the parental home; the elder, angry and unforgiving, is alienated from the household. Father and son were reconciled, but not brother and brother. Did the father overcome the hard feelings of the elder? Did he persuade him to join in welcoming his brother? Our Lord's experience conveys a sad denial, for He failed to move the self-righteous religious leaders. And there still are good people who would not be caricatured by the figure of the Elder Brother.

## The Dissatisfied Workers

Matthew 20, 1-16.

OUR LORD told a story about workers in a vineyard. At the vintage season a farmer went at daybreak to the market-place, where he hired men for the agreed fair wage of a dinar a day. (The old translation "penny" was appropriate at a time when a man could live on stipence a week.) The landholder went out again at nine o'clock, at noon and in mid-afternoon, and hired fresh batches of men, promising to pay them "what is fair."

Going out about an hour before sunset, "he found more men standing about." "Why," he asked them, "have ye been standing idle here all day?" They answered; "It is because no one has hired us." He said: "Go you also into the vineyard." These unemployed men had got no chance; there is no suggestion that they had refused previous offers of work.

So far it is a simple natural story. At sundown came payment-time; for the Mosaic law prescribed that a casual labourer should be paid every day. We are informed of the exact lengths of time each group worked, as if we were being given data for calculating the respective payments. But Our Lord's parables are never platitudinous; they always contain a thought-provoking or paradoxical feature. So here we read that the farmer told his foreman: "Call in the workers and pay each of them a full day's wages. Start with the last group and end with the first."

There is no implication that the latecomers worked harder

than those engaged early. Yet each of the five o'clock ("seventh hour") batch was given a dinar. "But when in their turn the first hired men came along, they expected to be given more, yet they too were paid only a dinar each." It was the standard wage, and they had contracted for it.

Naturally they complained to the farmer: "These last comers have worked for only an hour, yet you have put them on a level with us who have borne the day's burden and heat." Jesus was quite familiar with the outlook of labourers; Joseph and then Himself may well have employed such on contract jobs. He knew that His hearers would feel sympathy with the grumblers. This is what He intended; the story was deliberately planned to end in a seeming paradox.

The farmer replied to the leader of the deputation: "My good man, I am not doing you any injustice. Did you not agree with me for a dinar? So take what is yours and go. . . . Are you envious because I am generous?" They had not been defrauded, the wage-contract was observed. They became discontented only when they saw the unearned bonus given to those who, through no fault of their own, started work later. They should have been glad to observe that their less fortunate fellow-workers received a living wage also.

But Christ was not giving a lesson in labour relations. He was striking at the grumbling Pharisees. To them His great offence was that He welcomed everyone into the Kingdom. He even went out of His way to seek out and invite sinners and tax-collectors. They objected to having these put on a level with them. Their view of other-world accountancy led them to believe that they were a privileged caste with a special spiritual status which even God was bound to respect. Later on many converted Jews took the same attitude towards the admission of Gentiles.



The discontented workers represent not only the Pharisees but a common trait in human nature; the inclination to self-righteous snobbery. This tendency, observable in social and financial exclusiveness, is unfortunately found also in the sphere of religion. Cradle-Catholics may look askance at converts; many resent a dying gangster receiving the sacrament; good people are often prone to be stingy, to denigrate outsiders, to pass harsh judgement on sinners, in a word, to be covetous because God is generous. Such find themselves rebuked in this parable. We must respect God's gratuitous grace. We should imitate the merciful and all-embracing love of Jesus.

[We realize the scandal of this story by contrasting two later Jewish parables concerning a king employing workmen. (1) In one story, a late-comer received a full day's wage like those who had worked all day. In reply to complaints the king said: "This man has by hard work done more in two hours than you did for the whole day." A brutal story of payment by piece-rate. (2) In the second parable, one man had been working for many days, and so he received much more than those who had laboured for only one day. "Even so did Israel in this world claim their reward from God, while the other nations also sought to obtain their garden." This is the attitude against which the Gospel parable is directed.]

## 55

### Two Men at Prayer

Luke 18. 9-14.

Our Lord told a story of two men who happened to be praying in the Temple at the same time. From this—as from the example of Simeon and Anna—we incidentally learn that the sanctuary in Jerusalem was a place not only of animal sacrifices but of quiet worship and prayer. We are clearly told the object of the recital. It was in reference to "certain people who considered themselves holy while looking down on everyone else."

"One was a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector." Hearing this opening sentence, a Jewish auditor would be certain that the latter would be depicted as having scant claim to be heard at all. The tax-collectors (*publicans*) worked for the Romans; they were often guilty of extortion; they were boycotted by the patriotic; they were shunned by the orthodox. On the other hand, at the time Our Lord spoke, the Pharisees (*Pharisei* or *Separatists*) were a religious élite enjoying popular prestige and influence.

The Pharisee, too well-bred to pray aloud, silently thanked God for his virtuous and religious conduct; he did not dream of taking the credit to himself. He had much to be thankful for: religious training and practice, which so many others lacked. He performed many works of supererogation: fasting twice a week, paying the ten per cent, dues not merely on what he produced but on all that he bought. As we would put it,

he was not only ascetic but generous in contributing to religious and charitable purposes. Our Lord says nothing to disparage this pious man's claim to the virtues on which he prided himself.

The tax-collector did not dare to come close to the sanctuary; he did not even lift his eyes to heaven. He knew he was a bad man; he had no virtues to catalogue, no good deeds to blazon. He kept striking his breast and praying aloud: "God be merciful to me a sinner."

And now Our Lord uttered a startling paradox which completely reversed the current assessment of the pair. "This man," He said, "went home higher in God's grace than the other." Let us try to understand this unexpected verdict, for the types represented by these two men still exist to-day. Where was the fatal flaw in the Pharisee's religion?

He treated holiness as something so easily attainable by external practices that he could smugly congratulate himself on having reached it. He asked God for nothing; not for pardon, mercy or grace. He almost congratulated God for having made such a good job of him. He completely lacked any consciousness of sin. The Pharisee told God what he thought of himself; and Christ told us what God thought of him.

And, in his spiritual pride, he had a contempt for others. He gave thanks to God that he was "not like that tax-collector over there." Ah, he wasn't so absorbed in his prayers after all. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the man of whom he probably knew nothing except his occupation. He dragged him into his prayer to form the dark background for his own shining virtues.

The collector, on the other hand, accuses himself, not others. Perhaps, as the other man suggested, he was guilty of extortion,

law-breaking, adultery. The Pharisee was good and knew it; the tax-man was bad and knew it. We hear nothing about resolutions of amendment. Levi gave up his post and followed Christ; Zakkai gave half his goods to the poor and offered fourfold restitution. This fellow just kept beating his breast, confessing his sins, and asking for mercy. And Our Lord hinted that by his humble prayer he won the grace of effective repentance.

There is a perennial lesson in this story, even for good people, indeed especially for them. A lesson of humble dependence on God, against spiritual pride and smug self-satisfaction. A lesson of charity and kindness in our attitude to sinners, especially the disreputable ones. Spiritual sins are worse in God's sight than grosser sins, for they misuse man's higher faculties. And their special danger is that they are psychologically compatible with a high degree of what men esteem as goodness.

## The Wounded Traveller

Luke 10, 25-35.

A Jewish theologian, a specialist in the Mosaic Law, once put a query to Our Lord: "What must I do to gain eternal life?" There was no hostile intent; but the question was regarded as an impersonal theological problem. In reply to Christ, the lawyer quoted the Bible, "Love the Lord your God . . ." from Deuteronomy (6, 5) and with this he combined Leviticus 19, 18: "Love your associate<sup>1</sup> as yourself." Jesus praised this excellent summary of basic religion: "Act accordingly and you will have life."

But the man, evidently an experienced casuist, wanted a definition of "associate" (neighbour), so that one could know precisely who had and who had not a claim on his love. Surely not everyone! Our Lord did not treat the question in an abstract or juristic manner. Instead, He improvised a story, taken from life, simple and touching, intelligible even to a child.

A Jew, travelling down the bleak, dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho, was set upon by brigands; probably not ordinary highwaymen but guerrilla fighters against Rome, needing supplies. The man was beaten up, robbed and left

<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew word (*ra'ah*) means any fellow-human. The Greek and the Latin versions render "one who is near." Hence the English "neighbour," which may be misleading. Leviticus 19, 34 also extended the precept to a *ger*, one of the so-called non-Israelites in Palestine—most later taken to be a proselyte.

half-dead. After a time a priest, returning to his home in Jericho after his week's ministration in the Temple, came along. He saw the wounded man but "passed by on the other side" of the road. We are inclined to think his action inhuman. But Jewish theology had a streak of fatalism; the evil plight of the traveller may have appeared as God's judgement. Besides, there was danger that the bandits were not far away. And if the man died on his hands, he would have to bury him. The priest knew all about the commandment, but he did not think that it applied to the present case.

The next man to come along thought the same. He was a levite, a cleric of lesser status. Perhaps he felt he need not do what the priest did not. And both may have left the task to the next layman to arrive. Not only did Our Lord single out the churchmen of His time for a sorry role, but He brought a Samaritan, a hated heretic, to the rescue.

The Samaritan, a commercial traveller with merchandise, "was filled with pity as soon as he saw the man," in spite of being a tempting booty for robbers, he dismounted and administered first aid to the injured Jew. In the East what was provision for food was considered the best dressing for wounds. He washed the wounds with wine (i.e. disinfected with alcohol) and applied oiled bandages. Hoisting the man on to his riding-donkey, he brought him to the khan, the site of which is still marked by a modern ruin. He interrupted his journey, looking after the patient until next morning. On leaving, he paid the caravanserai attendant two dinars—probably all he had—for minding the sick man, promising more on his way back after selling his goods.

What practical charity was rendered, without reflection or hesitation! Even more striking is the fact that help was given by one who was despised by orthodox Jewry. No-one—either

Jew or Samaritan—would have blamed him for ignoring the wounded Jew. It is likely that since childhood he had learnt that to be "a good Samaritan" he must have no dealings with the Jews.

"Now," said Jesus to the lawyer, "In your opinion which of these three showed himself to be 'neighbour' to the man who fell into the brigands' hands?" Not wishing even to use the word Samaritan, he replied: "He who took pity on him." The doctor of the Law had asked: Who is the "neighbour" I am bound to help? But Christ now put a question which meant: To whom can I by my service become a "neighbour"?

Jesus' final word to His interrogator was: "Go you and do as he did." From being an impersonal question of moral theology, He made it a lesson for practice, an ideal of personal service, especially for all who look after souls or bodies. The idea of "neighbour" was universalised. Race and creed are irrelevant; there is only one test; need. Every man, not merely a co-religionist, is my brother.

The lesson is enhanced when we instinctively take the Good Samaritan as a type of Our Lord Himself who came to the rescue of wounded humanity; and when we think of His further teaching that what we do for anyone in need is done for Him.

[We should appreciate Christ's universality expressed by what seemed a shocking paradox. Even some recent Jewish scholars have asserted that what Christ said was "a certain Israelite." To reprehend Priest and Levite, while holding a Samaritan up as a model, was as much a scandal as if we heard in a sermon Priest and Brother denounced and an English Protestant held up for admiration!]

## The Passion and Ourselves

Our attitude to the Passion is quite different from that which we adopt towards a historical pageant or film. These are merely helps for our imagination; no-one pretends to take part in a scene of the past. But when we go into a church to make the Holy Hour or the Stations, we leave our petty hand-drum lives at the door, we enter a timeless atmosphere. We kneel beside the Son of Man in Gethsemani, we join in the death-march to Calvary. And this is not just make-believe.

On the road to Damascus Our Lord said to Saul: I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. And later He might have said to Paul: I am Jesus whom you are counselling and helping. What holds for evil must be valid for good. And this not merely in the sense that what we do for the least of His brothers or sisters—His Mystical Body—will be regarded by Christ as done for Him. We reach back into the past, we insinuate ourselves into those scenes. St. Paul says: "I am nailed to the cross with Christ. . . . The Son of God loved me and sacrificed Himself for me." But Paul was no more physically present on Calvary than we were. Yet he was really there; we were all there; we are there.

Our Lord does not save or love us anonymously or in a crowd. He calls His own sheep by name. He comes to each of us in Holy Communion as if there were no-one else in the world. He died for Paul, He suffered and died for me



individually. Writing for a person in the world, St. Francis de Sales said in his *Devout Life*:

"It is certain that the Heart of our dear Jesus saw yours from the tree of the Cross, and loved it; and by this love He obtained for it all the good things you have ever had or will ever have, and amongst others your salvation. . . . Our Lord thought of and cared for all His dear children in such a manner that He thought of each one of us as though He had no thought at all for the rest."

An American Negro Spiritual asks: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Yes, we were. To that hillock centuries ago every grief and joy of ours, every word and work, every sin and shame, came before Christ's inward eye in detail. Every sin of ours added a bitter drop to that mysterious cup from which He drank in Gethsemani. And every time we join our sufferings to His and unite our will to God's design, we lighten His burden, we kneel beside Him.

Pius XI wrote in his *Encyclical Mournful Redeemer* (1928):

"If, in view of our own future sins foreseen by Him, the soul of Jesus became sad even unto death, there can be no doubt that, by His provision at the same time of our act of reparation, He was in some way comforted."

One drop of His blood could have redeemed us. His Passion was an overflow of love, to draw us all to Himself. Every day at Mass His sacrifice is deployed for us through time and space. And when we meditate on the Passion, the centuries fall away and we take our stand with Our Lady, St. John, Simon, Dismas. But alas! how many side with those who jeered and scoffed and mistreated Him! For them Our Lord asked forgiveness, for they do not know what they are doing.

## The Final Appeal to Jerusalem

Mat. 21. 1-11.      Mark 11. 1-11.  
 Luke 19. 28-44.    John 12. 12-19.

THE high-priest, Joseph Caiaphas, had finally succeeded in getting both parties in the Sanhedrin to form a common front against the Nazarene. Our Lord was "on the run." He was in hiding in northern Judea. An official announcement was made that anyone knowing His whereabouts should give the information; perhaps a reward was offered. Yet Christ joined the Galilean Passover pilgrims at Jericho and came up to Bethany, about two miles outside Jerusalem.

Then—on the day we call Palm Sunday—He decided to make a solemn entry into the city. He made careful preparations, for this was His last public proclamation, His final appeal. He could have walked with the Apostles over the hill and down into the city. But He deliberately had a donkey fetched. The disciples placed a cloak for a saddle and He mounted, probably sitting sideways rather than astride.

The Jews, so familiar with their Bible, so quick to interpret a gesture, understood the reference to Zachary: See, your King comes in peace, mounted on an ass. It was a messianic prophecy which puzzled Jewish exegeses. For the general expectation was that the Messiah would come as a warrior-king and conquer the Roman invaders. Many such armed leaders had arisen, many more such claimants were to arise, and were slaughtered.

Our Lord had constantly striven to disincarnate Himself from this Messianic Zionism. So now He decided to enter the city, riding on a donkey, not on a war-horse, leading a peaceful procession. He would take away any excuse for misunderstanding His mission.

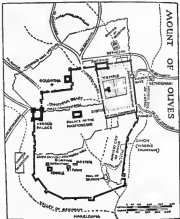
Alas! He knew that His appeal was to be in vain. When the first waves of the procession crested the Mount of Olives, there below them lay the city and the glorious sunlit Temple. The crowd paused awe-struck, thinking of the Messiah coming to take possession. But His eyes saw what they could not see. In the momentary silence He broke into a loud lament.

"Oh if you only knew, even now to-day, the path to peace. But alas! it is hidden from your sight. A time is coming when your enemies will fix a palisade round you to encircle you. They will hem you in on every side. Both you and your people within you they will cast down, leaving not one stone on another inside your walls. And all because you did not avail of My coming to you."

Even a prescient human leader might have foreseen the catastrophe which a purely nationalist material-minded religion would bring on the nation. On the very spot where Our Lord halted, forty years later, the Tenth Legion encamped before the doomed city. He loved Jerusalem and His people. But His tears have significance for a world which, turning from His message, relies on lethal weapons and physical force.

The procession moved on, with jubilant acclamations of Hosanna for the Son of David. They waved palms, they spread cloaks and herbage on the path. The crowd, especially the Galilean pilgrims, expected a great reception from the Jewish hierarchy, perhaps even a miraculous demonstration. But Our Lord did nothing. The Sanhedrists merely scowled and protested. The people, disappointed at what they considered

a face, dispersed in disaffection. Even the children's cries died down. He came to His own, and His own refused to welcome Him. In the evening He returned quietly to Bethany.



Directions to the state of  
New York.

## Rejected !

Matt. 26, 1-5. Mark 14, 1-5.

Luke 22, 1-2.

EVEN before Our Lord made His last journey to Jerusalem, Jewish Senators, representing the two leading parties, held a caucus meeting. This Man, said the Pharisees, is working miracles. If we let Him go on, the people will accept Him as Messiah, in spite of His disregard of the Mosaic Law. And the Sadducees felt that there was danger of a popular uprising which would provoke the Romans to repression. One party had a religious objection; the other feared a disturbance of the status quo and the loss of their privileges.

Caiaphas was, with his father-in-law Annas, the master-mind behind the plot to destroy Jesus. He and his colleagues who formed the chief-priestly clan did not argue with Our Lord as did the Pharisees. He bided his time and then he struck. Having brought both sides together, he now intervened. "Do you not realize," he asked, "that it is to your interest that one Man should die for the people instead of letting the whole nation perish?"

It was a damnable clever argument, the first step in inducing the nationalist Pharisees to agree to getting Rome to kill the disturber. It was expedient for all parties to see that this Man should die in the interests of the Jewish people. In the event indeed the rejection of Christ, and the choice of Barabbas,

proved anything but expedient for Sanhedrin or nation. But as an immediate policy the high-priest's proposal worked. A common front was formed against the Nazarene.

In the ancient world—as also! in large regions of the world to-day—one human life counted little in comparison with what was regarded as the interest of the collectivity. Both Pharisees and Sadducees agreed in proclaiming the Fatherland to be in danger. Thus, by Caiaphas' shrewd manoeuvre, the purely religious question was shelved. There was no further discussion of Jesus' credentials, no inquiry as to whether His teaching agreed with Law and Prophets. His claims were judged solely by their possible repercussions on the relations of Israel to the Empire.

There was probably also a perverted religious element in the resolution. Philo Byblus, a pagan historian, tells us that in a great crisis of a city or a nation it was "a custom of the ancients to give up their most beloved children for sacrifice as a sacrifice to the avenging demons," and these were then "slain with mystic rites." In certain sacrifices the Hebrews regarded the victim as a substitute bearing the offerer's guilt and receiving the punishment due to him.

So St. John tells us that the high-priest was unknowingly "inspired to say that Jesus was to die for the nation." He adds: "Indeed not only for the nation but to unite the scattered children of God." The evangelist does not deny the simple historical fact that Caiaphas was uttering a cynical maxim of politics. Like the purple robe, the crown, the title on the cross, there was unconscious prophecy here, a divine irony. Though he knew it not, the high-priest was offering up a victim on behalf of the people, as on the Day of Atonement.

In spite of this joint resolution—which He knew from friendly sources—Our Lord came out of retirement, appeared openly

among the pilgrims and taught publicly in the Temple porticoes. So the exasperated Jewish leaders held another secret meeting. They decided to keep on the look-out for some underhand way of arresting Him. "Not in the presence of the festival crowds," they said, "or there might be a popular riot." Their opportunity came when an Apostle turned renegade.

[On Wednesday Caiaphas convened a meeting in his palace (where Christ was subsequently tried), probably not of the whole Sanhedrin but of a sub-committee. The death of Jesus had already been decided. This caucus meeting was to discuss how best to carry out the decision. "They were afraid of the people." A public arrest, while Jesus was surrounded by disciples and auditors, might well lead to a riot. The Galilean pilgrims would easily be aroused to action. So it was agreed that the Nazarene was to be captured quietly and stealthily, "not in the presence of the festival crowd." (This is not only a possible translation but much more suitable than "not on the feast.") We must not interpret this as referring to a secret assassination, such as the Sanhedrists contrived at in the case of St. Paul (Acts 23. 12). If this had been the intension, there was no reason to fear a riot. But Pilate's presence in the city was a deterrent against such a plot. And, however unscrupulous the Sadducees were, the Pharisees insisted on a condemnation with due formalities. This underhand seizure having been decided upon, we can see how valuable was the co-operation of Judas.]

## One of The Twelve

Mat. 26, 14-16. Mark 14, 10-12,  
Luke 22, 3-6.

On Wednesday of what we call Holy Week, some Temple-officers and chief-priests were furtively accosted by a man who said he was an intimate friend of the Nazarene. He was probably introduced by one of their intelligence-agents. They were delighted that at last they had secured entrance to their Enemy's camp. Seeing Judas's venality, they promised him a substantial reward. (We do not know how much. For St. Matthew's phrase "they weighed him out thirty silver sheckels" is merely an appropriate Old Testament quotation, which nowadays we should put inside inverted commas.) He was assigned the task of keeping them informed of Jesus' movements; he was to report immediately if there was an opportunity of seizing Him quietly apart from the crowd. Next evening Judas was able to tell them of such a chance.

Judas is certainly an enigmatic and pathetic figure. But we must not regard him as a monster of iniquity or think that from the start he was a crook and a hypocrite. He began as a fervent believer, he volunteered, he was accepted. He was made an Apostle; he was even entrusted with the post of bearer to the company, for he probably had more education and business ability than the others.



It is difficult to discern his gradual loss of fervour, his growing disillusionment. For he was a dark horse, unlike his open-hearted native colleagues. James and John showed their ambitions, Thomas his pessimism. Impetuous Peter had often to be checked by Our Lord. But on the only occasion on which Judas was provoked to protest, he cloaked his true motive under the garb of charity.

It commenced with peculation, he began to accumulate capital on the side, he siphoned from the community fund. Starting by way of reward for unrequited skill, this percolating of missionary money soon became an insurance against the failure which he felt would be the outcome of the Master's unworldliness. The early Galilean idyll was dimmed by the growing opposition of the Jewish religious authorities. And Jesus, instead of leading a victorious band, kept skulking with a handful of followers and hinting at His impending ignominious death. Let us not be too hard on Judas. He was full of the nationalist-Messianic prejudices of his time. And, unlike us, he did not know the end of the story.

It is terrifying, however, to think of the grace he received. He had three years of close companionship with Jesus. His office involved frequent interviews with the Master; he must have been Jesus' private secretary on many an errand of mercy. His case embodies the mystery of freewill and grace. He was not foreordained to be a traitor. Had he corresponded with the graces of his vocation, he would now be venerated as a saint with the other Apostles.

Our Lord was very gentle and patient with Judas. Not even at the Last Supper did He disclose the identity of the traitor to the others. Had He done so, Peter and the others would surely have roughly handled him. Christ got him out of the way by sending him on an errand. Judas slipped out

into the night and informed the chief-priests that their opportunity had come. Jesus would that night be found in an olive-orchard down in the Kidron valley, with only a handful of followers. This was the chance for which Caiaphas had been waiting. So, keeping Judas as tracker, he decided on an immediate arrest.



*Judas surrendering the money and  
hanging himself.—The Synoptic  
Gospels, c. A.D. 300.*

## Down to the Orchard

Matt. 26. 30-35. Mark 14. 26-30.

Luke 22. 31-34, 38. John 18. 1.

HAVING instituted the Eucharist—thereby consecrating Himself forever as Victim—and finished His sacerdotal prayer, Our Lord led the Eleven out of the Supper Room. He began His last short journey as a free man, about half an hour's walk. We can tell how He went; His route is marked by features which have survived. First down the slope of Zion along the street of stone steps which the Assumptionists uncovered some years ago. Then out of the city through a gate near Siloam, turning northwards up the Kidron (or Black Valley) and passing three elaborate tombs which still exist. In spite of the full moon it was dark down here, especially under the high wall of the Temple.

They began by chanting some Psalms together; one might call it the first recitation of the Divine Office. Then He spoke sadly to the Apostles; they would all lose their trust in Him that night, they would desert Him. Over-confident Peter protested: "Even if all the others fail You, I shall not do so." Our Lord sadly predicted that before early cockcrow he would disown Him thrice. "But," He added, "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail so that when you have recovered you may be able to strengthen your brothers." Christ was thinking of His little flock and how His vicar-shepherd could help them after he had learnt humility and conquest.

Crossing over to the eastern side of the ravine, they came to an olive-orchard called Gethsemani (or Olive-Press). It was not a garden in the western sense ; it had trees, not flowers. They had often bivouacked here, for it was owned by some friendly adherent in Jerusalem. Here at the foot of the Mount of Olives He paused. He could, as He had often done, have gone up over the hill to His friends in Bethany. He could indeed, had He so wished, have escaped down the road to Jericho. But no. He would voluntarily wait here for Judas and His cohorts.

Eight of the Apostles He posted as a picket at the entrance. He took human precautions to forestall being captured by surprise. He took with Him the favoured Three—Peter, James and John—who had seen Him raise Jair's daughter and had witnessed His Transfiguration. They would be company for Him; unlike the others, they ought not to be shocked at what was about to happen.

For now, as they walked among the trees, a new phase of His life began, a great change came over Him. He who had hitherto been a tower of strength began to show human weakness and shrinking. He who had been so reticent about Himself and so solicitous for others, became "overwhelmed by sadness and dejection." "My soul," He said, "is mortally sad." He, who up to now had prayed in solitary seclusion or alone on a hill-top, felt the need of human companionship as He prayed. "Stay here," He said to the Three, "and keep awake with Me." That was all He asked from them!

Then He went a short distance away and prostrated Himself on the ground. His great struggle began. In the fourth century a church was built over the spot. In the modern basilica the bare rock whereon He lay in prayer lies exposed before the high altar. Thousands have kissed the spot; millions have in

spirit knelt beside the prostrate Son of Man. Pagans have scoffed at the scene, theologians have wrestled with the mystery. But never was Our Lord so human, so near us as here. Had He faced His Passion with imperturbable majesty, we should still have adored Him. But when we see Him shrinking and struggling beforehand, we can lovingly share "the fellowship of His sufferings," for we know that He is "like us in everything but sin."

[The devotion to the Passion in the modern sense—that is, the affective concentration on, and com-pas-sion with, Our Lord's sufferings—originated in the fourth century with the Holy Week cycle in Jerusalem. The pilgrim Etheria (about A.D. 400) tells us about Good Friday in Jerusalem. After individual veneration of the relic of the Cross, a service was held in the open court before Calvary from noon to 3 p.m. Psalms, Prophets, the Gospels describing the Passion, were read; prayers and hymns were interspersed. "The emotion shown and the mourning by all the people at every lesson and prayer is wonderful. For there is none, either great or small, who, on that day during those three hours, does not lament more than can be conceived, that the Lord had suffered those things for us." The devotion of the Three Hours was revived by the Jesuits in Lima (Peru) towards the end of the seventeenth century, and subsequently spread throughout the world.]

## Our Lord's Prayer

Mat. 26, 36-46. Mark 14, 32-42.

Luke 22, 40-46.

After walking thirty or forty yards under the moon-dappled olive-trees, Our Lord went a few yards away from the Three. Often previously He had spent the night in prayer; perhaps they had occasionally seen Him. But never before stretched on the ground, weak and crushed. And He began to pray aloud: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup be taken from Me. Yet not as I will, but as You will."

Tradition says that it was higher up the hill of Olivet that the disciples once asked Him how to pray. And He gave them the *Pateroster*, which we call the Lord's Prayer. But this prayer in Gethsemani is His own prayer in a special manner. In it we find echoes of the prayer He gave to the Apostles: Father, lead us not into temptation, deliver us from evil, Thy will be done. In His hour of need He made the prayer His own.<sup>1</sup>

It was the first act of the tremendous drama. Later the stage would be crowded with actors; but here in the orchard He is alone with His Father. In the Cenacle Our Lord—calm, majestic, priestly—prayed as a Son to the Father; now He beseeches Him as a prostrate victim. We get a glimpse into a fathomless mystery beyond the plummet of our puny

<sup>1</sup> Our Lord, of course, did not say "Our Father," but "My Father." Cf. John 20, 17.

psychology: Jesus shrinking from the coming ordeal and asking to be spared "if it is possible." He knew that there was no other way; for almost in the same breath He says: "Your will be done." Now we witness a struggle within His very soul, the tension between the acceptance of a destiny—consecrated in the eucharistic oblation of His Blood—and the shrinking of a sensitive spirit.

The great volume of human pain is within; anxiety concerning threatened evil or impending suffering is a peculiarly human attribute; for man looks before and after. Christ willed to experience, to the utmost, human weakness and loneliness which was spared to martyrs and to others animated by supernatural courage. Since the Son of God took this on Himself, no-one can claim exemption, not even from those human weaknesses and shrinkings which are so humiliating for good people. And when He took refuge in prayer, and even sought human companionship, no-one should be ashamed to imitate Him.

"An angel from heaven appeared to Him and gave Him strength." Who could have dared to invent this astounding paradox, which shocked many early Christians? It was as though pity swept through heaven, and relief had to be despatched. In order to assume all our frailties and to show the reality of His humanity, He refused to allow the intervention of His divinity. His chosen Apostles had failed Him; His other friends were in Bethany. The angelic visitant made reparation for men's failure. Perhaps Gabriel was the anticipatory representative of all those who in the centuries to come were to kneel in spirit beside the Son of Man.

"As He was engaged in a great struggle, He prayed most intensely." Nowadays the word "agonizing" is used to denote the throes of death. But in the Gospel the word is used in its Greek meaning: a struggle, a violent effort, a mortal combat.

After long prayer and heavenly help, Jesus began His joyful acceptance of the Passion. With the passing of the emergency, there was a violent reaction. There was profuse perspiration, also a rush of blood to the skin. So severe was the shock, that the tiny blood-vessels were ruptured and blood exuded into the sweat-glands beneath the skin. "His sweat became blood-laden and trickled down to the ground." It was the first instalment of our ransom. His precious Blood was shed before scourge or nail had touched Him. Our Saviour is never so near and dear to us as when we see His blood-flecked figure under the olive-trees. Now we know how real was His Passion. Which of us can henceforth dare to complain how hard it is to face trials and to avoid sin?

[God, incomprehensible and inaccessible, took a human soul to show us how our sins and petty doings affect Him. Here in Gethsemani, time and space are swept away; past and present and future are before Him. Had He an intellect less far-seeing and a heart less loving and vulnerable, there would have been no agony. My sins added to His burden; but in some mysterious way I can also lighten it. Cardinal Newman wrote (in his *Meditations and Devotions*): "My God, I know not in what way I can pain Thee in Thy glorified state. But I know that every fresh sin, every fresh ingratitude I now commit, was among the blows and stripes which once fell on Thee in Thy Passion. Oh, let me have as little share in those Thy past sufferings as possible."]



## The Drowsy Trio

When they were well inside the orchard, Our Lord said to Peter, James and John: "Stay here, keep awake and watchful with Me." Then He went forward a few paces and began His prayer, prostrate on the ground. He posted the Three not only as dear friends whose company He desired, but as sentries to warn Him against the approach of enemies.

Hitherto the Three had always been chosen to receive a privilege, to witness a miracle or to have a vision of His glory. But now—oh, wondrous paradox!—it was He who had need of them. He felt a loneliness far beyond that of the greatest genius. He experienced that pathetic craving for human companionship so characteristic of the dying. Peter had vowed never to be separated from Him; James and John had promised to share His cup. Now they were given the chance. He was about to suffer for the whole of sinful humanity. So He wished to have representatives at His side, united with Him in prayer, associated with Him in His sufferings.

Jesus interrupted His prayer and returned to His Three friends. There they were, in startled slumber, stretched beneath the olive-trees. At first they had kept awake, full of vague surmises and dim forebodings, alarmed at the Master's clamant prayer. They were tired, they had gone through a period of emotional stress, they lacked any premonition of impending catastrophe to keep them awake. So they began to

done. What a chance they missed—but how pathetically human! They who often strenuously rowed all night and fished in the dark waters of Galilee's Lake succumbed to drowsiness when appointed companions and sentries close beside their praying Lord.

He gently chid Peter: "Simon, were you unable to keep awake a while with Me?" From him at least vigilance could be expected. He was the leader, he had expressed readiness to die with Him. Peter made no excuse: he was too ashamed to have been caught sleeping.

To us the Three seem inexcusable, apathetic, disloyal. We should have expected a vehement rebuke from their Master. While, for them and for their successors down the ages, He was agonizing and nerving Himself for sacrifice, they lay huddled in drowsy torpor. He was alone, as never before in His human life, in a sea of infinite desolation. He had touchingly appealed to His closest friends, for whose companionship He felt a dire need. He had asked so little of them; just to stay prayerfully awake with Him. And they had let Him down! To a sufferer nothing is so depressing and crushing as failure to receive help and sympathy from those nearest and dearest.

But even in His disappointment He does not forget the hardest thing for a sufferer to do: to make allowance for the weakness of others and to think of their concerns. It is characteristic of Jesus that He turned from His own suffering and need of sympathy to consider their interests and to give them helpful advice: "Stand up and pray that ye may not fail in the coming trial." We must take this literally. If they stood up, they would have a better chance of staying awake; and if they had fervently prayed, they would not have succumbed in the crisis.

He coined an excuse for them: "The spirit is ready but the flesh is weak." It is an admirable epitome of human life,

which is an incessant struggle between ideal aspirations and lower instincts, not necessarily sinful. It is not difficult, as did the Apostles, to believe and to affirm that one would face suffering and even death for God, while, through neglect of prayer and grace, one quickly succumbs to the unromantic minor infirmities of life. Our Lord, who knows our clay, is gentle and understanding. Let us not be too eager to blame those whom He excused. How consoling not only for the drowny disciples but also for us weaklings who so often are distracted and inattentive. We see how He deals with faults of weakness, and we learn from Him how we in our turn should deal with others.

[St. Luke does not distinguish the two groups of Apostles (the eight and the Three) or the three periods of prayer. Many commentators have applied Luke's phrase (22, 41) "about a stone's throw," i.e. about forty yards, to the Three instead of to the eight. Matthew and Mark make it clear that the Three were only "a short distance" from Jesus. They could see Him and hear His prayer.

Why did He bring the Three so close to Him? Karl Adam has written: "He did this for their sakes, not for His. They were to steel themselves to meet the approaching danger. . . . The disciples gave Him nothing; He gave them everything." This dehumanizes the Agony; it is incompatible with His heartrending prayer which was no make-believe. "Stay awake with Me," Jesus pleaded. He was afraid to be alone; He hungered for their company. Alas! The Three, representing all of us, failed Him.]

## The Decision to Arrest

WHILE Our Lord was praying and the Apostles were sleeping below in the orchard, fateful events were happening above in the city. Judas, ostensibly sent on an errand, slipped away from the supper-room, and reported to his new employer. The priests saw that their liaison agent had practically severed himself from the company and could no longer serve them.

Judas brought surprising news, too. Jesus seemed to be in a mood for accepting capture and death. He would conveniently be bivouacking down in the Kidron with only eleven followers, and they would be expecting Judas to rejoin them.

After discussion, the ringleaders agreed that the opportunity was too good to be missed. It was now or never. But it was also necessary to induce Pilate to hold a court very early next morning. Otherwise Jesus would have to be kept in goal during the seven days of the festival; and this might lead to a popular demonstration. They would furthermore have to be reasonably sure of a Roman crucifixion, otherwise they would not have proceeded at all.

Caiphas, who was paying handsomely for his retention of office, undertook to interview his patron Pilate. He obtained from the Governor an assurance that he would be ready to act shortly after dawn on Friday. He even secured the collaboration of a detachment of the Roman garrison in effecting the capture of the Nazarene. Caiphas may have genuinely feared armed resistance, or at least a spontaneous revolt of the

numerous Galilean pilgrims encamped on the Mount of Olives. Besides, the Jews had a wholesome respect for One who had magical if not miraculous powers. So it seemed very advisable to have the courage of the Jewish police stiffened by the presence of Roman soldiers. Pilate had no grounds for a direct arrest; unlike Barabbas, the Nazarene had never appealed to physical force. But Caiaphas promised him that by next morning they would prove charges against Him as an agitator.

Judas had now gone too far to retreat; he was in the power of the Sanhedrists. Before paying and dismissing him, they decided to impose one more task on him. He was to act as tracker, to seek and point out Jesus, whom alone they wanted. Oriental bearded men, with headgear and long robes, are not easily distinguishable, especially in a dark wooded valley. Jesus might be hidden in one of the caverns on the hillside; if abruptly aroused, He could escape. There might even be pickets, as in fact there were. Yet it was essential to capture and to remove the Nazarene swiftly. Judas must have stipulated that he would remain unarmed and take no part in the actual arrest. He would merely single Him out, put the Apostles off their guard, and then slip quietly away.

It was Judas, not the Sanhedrists, who proposed the kiss of greeting. This gesture was not a shameless act of bravado, nor was it the expression of malevolence. Judas was merely thinking of saving his own skin. He may not have imagined that he could still deceive Christ; but he relied on His gentle forbearance, His reluctance to expose him openly to the other Apostles. So Judas wished to keep up appearances to the last, playing a part to deceive his colleagues and to avoid drawing their wrathful vengeance on himself. He would go right up to the Master, respectfully saluting Him as he would after an absence.

in fact Judas succeeded. It never occurred to the Apostles that this salute was the agreed signal of betrayal. Had Peter realised what it meant, it would surely have been against Judas that he would have used his weapon. So Judas got away with it. By means of this distasteful gesture he secured unviolated approach and withdrawal. But shortly afterwards he paid the penalty: the kiss of Jesus burnt his soul.

All arrangements being made, the arresting party set out, Judas the traitor at their head. The Jewish police were armed with sticks or mallets. The contingent of Roman mercenaries had swords and lanterns. Quietly they marched down into the ravine and surrounded the orchard.

[The participation of Roman auxiliary troops in the arrest has often been regarded as unhistorical, so that even some Catholic exegetes have tried to reinterpret the words of John. But the co-operation of Roman military and native police is quite in accordance with what we know of provincial administration. Apart from John's language which cannot be whittled away, there are many indications of the presence of a Roman military detachment in Gethsemani: (1) The Jewish authorities, having a wholesome dread of Jesus' powers, would naturally seek reinforcement. (2) The long delay between Judas' report to the chief priests and the despatch of a band to arrest can best be explained by negotiations with Pilate. (3) Next morning the Jewish leaders' expectation of Pilate's ready acceptance of their sentence points to a previous agreement. (4) Pilate's unexpectedly suspicious if not hostile attitude seems to show that his Commandant had informed him of the absence of any resistance on the part of the alleged rebel.]

## Captured !

Mat. 26, 47-54.

Mark 14, 43-51.

Luke 22, 47-53.

John 18, 3-9.

IN Gethsemane Our Lord exhibited the touchingly human traits of restlessness under tension and of a craving for companionship. Several times He rose from prayer and went over to His three friends. The first time He roused them from sleep and told them to stand up and pray. The second time He did not disturb them. On His third return apparently He found them awake. He took them back with Him to the entrance. There He found the eight asleep. "Get up!" He said. "Let us go! See, My betrayer has come!" So they went out into the path along which the lanterns and tin-torches of the arresting party could now be seen approaching. He did not want a man-hunt amid the olive-trees, nor would He leave the disciples to encounter the police without Him.

The armed emissaries were expecting a search and perhaps resistance. To their surprise, a group came out of the shadows and advanced to meet them. Probably pretending to dissociate himself from the enemy, Judas came ahead and perhaps met Christ just inside the orchard. He greeted his Master respectfully, kissing His hand and calling Him Rabbi. Our Lord did not indignantly spurn His renegade disciple, He showed neither repugnance nor indignation. He looked at Judas. The look of Jesus—what a different effect it had on erring Peter! Had

Judas even then, as did Peter, burst into tears and fled, he might still have been numbered among the Apostles and the saints.

It was the last meeting on earth between Jesus and Judas. With the tenderness of wounded love, Christ made His final appeal to win him back: "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?" The Apostles, grouped around their Master, had still no suspicion of their returning colleague. But now came the first overt act which brought home to them that one of them was a traitor. Judas quickly withdrew and joined the police. "There he was," says St. John, "standing with them." He had changed sides.

Over-eager to get through his risky and unpleasant task, Judas seems to have given the signal prematurely. The police were nonplussed at seeing the little band calmly approaching. Like a person interrupted in meditation, anxious to discover what the disturbance meant, Christ asked them: "Who is it ye are looking for?" Unsure of the Speaker's identity, they answered not "You," but "Jesus of Nazareth." They gave the official specification of the person to be arrested; it was not meant as a title of honour. But while these Jews had sunk anonymously into the grave—except for a few leaders destined to be held for ever up to obloquy—this Name was one which would be reverently invoked by millions down the ages.

"I am He," He said. Struck by a shaft of miraculous power or else in sheer human awe, the foremost drew back, causing others to stumble. Our Lord did not welcome the men's fall as if it were an act of imposed homage. We might even say that He became impatient. Twice He had to tell them who He was. "I have already told you," He said.

He added: "So if it is for Me ye are looking, let these others go away." Our Lord deliberately focused the police officers'



attention on Himself. He went further and explicitly excoriated and shielded His disciples. The Sanhedrists indeed decided to concentrate on the Leader. But that did not mean that if His followers interfered or showed fight, they were not to be hauled along. (In a short time the police would try to seize a young man who attempted to accompany them.) But we might almost say that, in return for voluntary submission, Our Lord made a bargain with His captors that the others would get off scot free. He wanted to protect those who were to carry on His work, to save them from a trial for which they were not yet ready. The unique nature of His vicarious all-sufficient sacrifice was not to be obscured by the accompanying execution of any disciple. The Good Shepherd was alone to give His life for His sheep.

[It was the completely voluntary submission of Christ to His sufferings which was emphasized in patristic writings and inspired the devotion of Christians. Says St. Athanasius: "He neither prevented those who were conspiring against Him, nor did He take vengeance on those who were putting Him to death, though He was able to do so. He who hindered some from dying and raised others from the dead, allowed His own body to suffer." To quote a medieval writer, Jordan of Quedlinburg (†1380): "O love, it was you who drew the Son of God from out the Father's bosom and shut Him up in the Virgin's womb. Then you bound Him to the pillar of the scourging and to the cross of suffering, for no other bonds could have held Him, but only the powerful bonds of love. No nail could have held Him, no iron could have kept Him fastened to the cross. Love alone bound Him, fastened Him to the cross and robbed Him of life."]

## Peter's Fight

Mat. 26. 51-54.

Mark 14. 47.

Luke 22. 49-51.

John 18. 10-11.

THE police, led by an officer called Malchus (a name corresponding to our Roy or Rex), closed in on Our Lord and started to pinion Him. Peter, who had fallen asleep during his prayers, was still dazed. But at the sight of men roughly handling his Master, his pastoral loyalty was aroused; his unbridled extrovert self rushed into action. With a cry of wrath he drew his sword and made a fierce slash at Malchus, whose hands were engaged in binding Christ.

Luckily Peter's clumsy blow was not fatal. The officer may have been wearing a helmet or else swerved his head. Instead of losing his life, he received a severe wound in the ear. But the situation was critical. The Romans might have moved up and started a massacre. Our Lord's status was compromised by this use of force. He had to intervene urgently. Disengaging His hand, He asked His captors to release their hold for a moment to allow Him to stoop down to the prostrate man and to touch his ear.

This was the last act of Christ as a free man, the final use of His hands before they were fettered and nailed. This was the only recorded healing performed on one who neither asked nor believed in Him. Never was a miracle so necessary. Our Lord had to obliterate Peter's deed. Otherwise the wounded

man would be paraded as a witness to prove armed resistance. But now the episode was made innocuous. Malchus was not subsequently produced; for he could only testify to a miracle.

Only when He had miraculously repaired the damage, did Christ, without expressly reproaching Peter, order him to put his sword back into its scabbard. The police were so awestricken that they used no violence, nor did they disarm Peter.

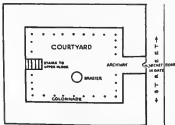
The Apostle had not yet divested himself of his messianic nationalism; and he was under the delusion that his Master needed protection. So Our Lord had to make His position clear to Peter and to the police. He could have healed Malchus without contact. He wished, however, to make positive reparation, to show by His gesture that He repudiated all resistance—but not through powerlessness.

"All who use the sword," He said, "will perish by the sword." This was not a general axiom; not everyone who fights for his country is killed. Nor was it a condemnation of legitimate defence in the sphere of civil polity. It was a pronouncement on a very living Jewish issue, another prediction of the fate of Jerusalem. Jesus rejected Zealotism, the widespread view that physical force was to be used to inaugurate or to restore the Kingdom of God—an idea that has often obsessed good men down the ages. Even we of to-day who are opposed to Communism must never forget that the deepest and most abiding forces are those of the spirit.

Turning to Peter, Christ intimated that He had really no need of his pany protection: "Do you imagine that, if I appeal to My Father, He will not immediately send Me more than twelve legions of angels?" How ridiculous was Peter's solitary sword! The Roman legion was then the greatest instrument of destruction and defence known to the world. God could send a heavenly legion to protect His Son and one to defend each of

the Eleven. "But," He added, "must I not drink the cup which My Father has presented to Me?" He now unflinchingly accepted the cup from which He had been shrinking.

Even humanly speaking, was not Jesus right? Apart altogether from the mystery of Redemption, His voluntary death has had infinitely greater influence on the world than the rebellions of Bar Cochba and other false Messiahs. He burst the racial and nationalist limitations of Palestinian religion, and drew all men to Himself, by turning the Star of David into a Cross. Peter, long before he himself was crucified in the Roman Circus, learnt the lesson. And to-day Peter's successor, armed only with the sword of the spirit, stretches out his hand, not to strike but to heal the successors of Makhos who seek to crush Christianity by force.



The Courtyard where Peter's Denial occurred.

## Peter's Fall

Mat. 26, 58, 69-71. Mark 14, 34, 66-71.

Luke 22, 54-62. John 18, 15-18, 25-27.

SWOONING on seeing their Master arrested and manacled, the Apostles, left unmolested, ran away. They probably went up the hillside and down to Bethany to their friends and women-folk. Peter bravely stood his ground, and at a safe distance followed the procession up the slope of Zion and through the streets. A halt was made at the gate of the high-priest's palace and the Prisoner was taken inside. Peter, anxious to keep near his Lord, was wondering how to get in. He was seen by an adherent of Christ, usually identified with St. John, but much more probably a Sanhedrist such as Nicodemus. This important person, speaking a few words to the portress, obtained Peter's admission.

Passing through a vestibule or archway, Peter found himself in a large courtyard or patio, surrounded by a colonnade and buildings. On the side facing the entrance was a staircase leading to a large audience-chamber on the first floor. The night being cold, the police and attendants had lit a brushwood fire in the middle of the court. Peter shuffled over and squatted down with the others. He was cold, and He wanted time to think. But he was rudely interrupted by a servant-girl who had strolled over to chat. Becoming suspicious of the furtive stranger, she suddenly said to him: "You aren't one of this

Man's disciples, are you?" Taken off his guard, Peter snapped back: "No, I am not."

Upset by the encounter, he moved off towards the archway. Perhaps he thought of going away, but the gate was locked; more probably he wanted a quiet interval away from the crowd. But even here another maid accosted him, and once more he denied he was an associate of Jesus. Peter must have been very irritated with these inquisitive servant-girls!

So back to the fire. As he sat there, he was thinking of his Master, wondering what was happening to Him, sometimes glancing up at the audience-chamber. All around him they were discussing events and rumours. To feel more secure, Peter joined in the conversation. It was a fatal mistake. These metropolitans recognised his Galilean accent. A relative of Malchus, peering at him in the firelight, suddenly asked: "Didn't I see you in the orchard with Him?" In frenzied irritation at this further interference, Peter began to shout imprecations and denials.

The ugly situation was interrupted by a sudden hush. The Prisoner was being brought down. In the ensuing silence the piercing note of a crowing cock rang out. The Prisoner passed close by; He deliberately turned and looked at Peter. No anger, no reproach; a glance of forgiveness and love. It was the look of Jesus which first drew Peter by the Jordan. It was this second look which united him forever with Jesus. In a flash Peter understood the divine economy of salvation through omnipotence suffering for love. Appalled by his obstinacy and disloyalty, he burst into tears. Pushing the others aside, he rushed out into the darkness.

It is a strange incident, apparently so alien to all that we otherwise know of Peter. For some years now he had, after giving up home and trade, kept close to Christ, in spite of

opposition and obloquy. Never flinching in his faith, he had asked at Capharnaum: "To whom else can we go?" At the foot of Hermon, he had confessed: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." A few hours ago he had single-handed drawn his sword against an armed band.

Peter did not waver in his faith; for this Christ had prayed. Nor did he lack physical bravery. But he was deficient in moral courage. He was in no real danger, but he did not want to be hustled out. Having decided to compromise externally, he felt no compunction in lying to his enemies. The attrition of his environment gradually made him act as "one of the gang."

That courtyard in Jerusalem is like the world of to-day. Christ is being condemned by the great ones of earth. Like Peter we are left below, warming ourselves at the fire of life, in the company of those who ignore or reject Christ. Do we make ourselves too much at home, do we succumb to what is called public opinion, do we fear to obtrude our religion on pleasant secular associations, do we take our tone from the world around us? If perchance the accent acquired in a Catholic upbringing betrays us, do we hotly repudiate any idea of bringing our religion into ordinary life? Then let us learn Peter's lesson. Let us, like him, see that look of Jesus which can turn cowardly compromisers into devoted apostles.

## The Prisoner is Interviewed

John 18. 19-23.

THE Roman contingent withdrew when the Prisoner was safely delivered to the Jewish authorities. The high-priests were nominated by the Roman Governor; they retained office only through subservience and bribery. At that time the official high-priest was Joseph Caiaphas; his tenure had already lasted twelve years. But the head of the powerful wealthy clan was his father-in-law, Annas (Hanan ben Seth), who had been deposed fifteen years previously, yet lived to see four sons and a son-in-law made high-priests. Being the Rothschild of Palestine, he was the power behind the scenes. These two implacable enemies of Christ, Annas and Caiaphas, worked in close collaboration. They may even have occupied the same palace.

The final decision to arrest Jesus had been taken only a few hours before; and it was not known beforehand how long the capture would take. Hence there was an interval before the members of the Jewish Supreme Court (Sanhedrin) could be assembled. So Annas had the Prisoner fetched for interrogation, hoping that this popular Preacher might be induced to make useful admissions. Annas asked Jesus about His teaching, for He was not an authorised or trained rabbi. He also sought information about the Nazarene's followers. The old man had arranged that Jesus was to be liquidated, but was anxious



to insure that this dangerous sect would not be propagated after the Founder's death.

Our Lord denied that He was leading a conspiracy or had been teaching a dangerous secret doctrine. He referred Annas to the numerous auditors who had heard Him preaching in synagogues and in the Temple colonnades. "Why are you interrogating Me? Find out what I said from those who heard Me." That is, instead of answering the questions, Our Lord challenged the method of inquiry.

In Roman legal procedure—as in France to-day—the accused was brought before a magistrate for private interrogation before he was remitted to a public trial. But not so in Hebrew law. In Jewish law the witnesses took the initiative both for arrest and for accusation. Their public deposition started the indictment; until then the defendant was not merely innocent but unaccused. Accordingly Our Lord quietly pointed out the illegality of the inquisition to which He was being subjected.

Whereupon, one of the police-officers slapped Jesus in the face. "Is that the way you answer the high-priest?" he asked. In the name of the national religion this underling struck the first blow against Jesus. He may have done so in order to please the old man. But more probably Annas, discomfited by the manly bearing of the Prisoner and vanquished in legal argument, ordered the blow. About twenty-five years later another high-priest ordered Paul to be struck on the mouth. Paul reacted vigorously: "God will strike you, you white-washed wall!"

Not so Our Lord. He calmly said to the policeman: "If what I have said is wrong, make a complaint against Me. Otherwise why do you strike Me?" On subsequent occasions when He was struck, He maintained patient silence. For such violence was merely the display of irrational enmity. But on

this occasion the blow was publicly inflicted for alleged disrespect, whereas Christ was merely respectfully drawing attention to the correct procedure. He protested not so much against the violence as against the unjust accusation coupled with it. From Our Lord's attitude we see that "turning the other cheek" means the absence of counter-violence, even on occasion the forgoing of self-defence, but does not preclude the calm protest of an unarmed man against the illegal action of an angry assailant.

Until recent times we thought that the world had become more humanitarian in the treatment of untried and even convicted prisoners. But Christ's dignified reply is very relevant to-day. It stands for ever as an eternal defence of the accused on trial against ill-treatment, psychological coercion, "conditioning," "Why do you strike Me?"

[John seems to apply the term "high-priest" both to Annas and to Caiaphas. To avoid this confusion various transpositions of the text (e.g. verse 24 after 13) have been proposed, but without textual evidence. Annas was certainly called "high-priest," and may have been regarded as rightfully so in spite of his deposition by the Romans. And it may have been his son-in-law who conducted the interrogation in his presence. John mentions "first to Annas" because he has something to tell us. The proceedings here are utterly different from those at the regular Jewish trial. John omits any account of the latter, perhaps as a mere formality or without interest for his readers; but he knew of the condemnation to death (19. 24). It is best to accept the text as describing a preliminary inquisition before the old man Annas, the powerful head of the clan.]

## Waiting for the Trial

Matt. 26, 47-68. Mark 14, 43.

Luke 22, 63-65.

In the Jewish Supreme Court (or Sanhedrin) there were two chief parties. There were the wealthy, worldly Sadducees, in control of the Temple and friendly to Rome. The Pharisees or Puritans were religious men of meticulous legal observance, nationalist in outlook but opposed to the use of physical force. We do not know their relative proportions in the Sanhedrin. But the Sadducees could not carry decisions or secure popular support without the concurrence of the Pharisees. A few months later, drastic action against Peter and John was blocked by the intervention of Gamaliel, a leading Pharisee. About thirty years later, the high-priest, a son of Annas, executed St. James; for this he was denounced to the Governor by the Pharisees.

Hence Calaphas had to move with great caution to preserve the common front. We may be sure that the Pharisees insisted on convening a court according to Jewish law, even though the the Romans regarded the proceedings merely as an investigation for formulating charges before the Governor. Also, the Pharisees must have insisted on the observance of due legal formalities. Modern charges of illegality are based on later rabbinic rules drawn up as an academic exercise early in the third century, long after the Sanhedrin and the Temple had

ceased to exist. The injustice of the trial was far deeper than neglect of legal forms.

It must have taken a considerable time to convene the members—presumably all seventy—at short notice. Probably the court sat from about 2 to 5.30 a.m. Meanwhile the Prisoner was kept in custody. The Jewish guards had witnessed the blow inflicted on Him, with the connivance of Annas or at his order. The redoubtable Nazarene had lost His majestic immunity. He was in their power at last. They decided to make rough sport of Him.

"They spat in His face." Though not causing physical pain, it was an outrageous insult. Even to-day Orientals testify their hatred and detestation of a person by spitting towards or on him. This treatment of Our Lord finds its parallel in our time in smashing crucifixes and in desecrating the Eucharist. But these police and attendants were not pagans or ethnists, they were His own people. He came unto His own; so far from receiving Him, they spat on Him.

Then they thought of enjoying some horseplay. They blindfolded Him and kept slapping Him in turn. "Show us," they said, "your prophetic gift of second sight, Messiah, by telling which of us struck You." They enjoyed this game of treating Jesus as a buffoon, an impotent, false Messiah. It is not said that they genuflected before Him, as shortly Pilate's Syrian mercenaries were to do. Hence such a gesture by Jews is not implied by the absence of genuflection before the prayer for the Jews in the Good Friday liturgy.

The evangelists simply give the facts, without making comment or expressing horror; there was no attempt at a harrowing enumeration of the outrages. St. Luke merely adds: "They heaped many other insults on Him." By way of comment for ourselves, let us read what the historian Froide

wrote about a sermon delivered by Newman in St. Mary's, Oxford :

"Newman described closely some of the incidents in our Lord's Passion. He then paused. For a few moments there was a breathless silence. Then in a low, clear voice, of which the faintest vibration was audible in the furthest corner of St. Mary's, he said: 'Now I bid you recollect that He to whom these things were done was Almighty God.' It was as if an electric stroke had gone through the church, as if every person present understood for the first time the meaning of what he had all his life been saying. I suppose it was an epoch in the mental history of more than one of my Oxford contemporaries."

Let us now in reparation chant the *Adeus Te Deros*: "Jesus whom I now see veiled, I crave that for which my soul is athirst: That, seeing You with face revealed, I may be gladdened by the vision of Your glory."

## Before the Jewish Court

Mat. 26, 59-65. Mark 14, 53-61.

Luke 22, 66-68.

THE Sanhedrists assembled, the officials took their places, the Prisoner was brought in, the proceedings began. In Jewish law there was no separate prosecutor, no formal indictment was framed, there was no charge until the evidence of the witnesses was before the court. Witnesses came forward voluntarily; they testified separately, not under oath; they took on themselves entire responsibility for the charge.

There was one curious rule; at least two witnesses must give direct testimony in exact verbal concordance; disagreement on an unimportant detail could invalidate their evidence. This rule does not prevail in modern courts. Appreciation of the credibility of a single witness is left to judge or jury; also circumstantial evidence is admitted.

There is no proof that in Our Lord's trial the witnesses were suborned; there were men sufficiently hostile and fanatical to come forward without being bribed. Had the testimony been concocted, it would surely have been more successful, the witnesses would have been coached better. The evidence of those whom the Gospels call "false witnesses" was objectively false and on cross-examination proved to be juridically invalid. Given their corruption and prejudice, the men need not have been subjectively wrong. Since their evidence failed to stand

up to the Jewish legal criterion, the discrepancies must have been pointed out by judges, either friendly to the Prisoner like Nicodemus and Joseph or legalistic if not fair-minded such as Gamaliel.

Various charges were heard, but failed to be legally substantiated. Finally two men presented themselves, each accusing Jesus of threatening to destroy the Temple. But this pair also failed to agree in required detail. There were no more witnesses available, and so no valid charge had emerged. The case had broken down.

Now if the chief priests had the matter in their own hands, they would have had no scruple in dispensing with legal formalities or with the Jewish law of evidence. But the Roman Governor wanted a report and an official accusation from the Sanhedrin. And the nationalist Pharisees, behind the scenes and independently of Pilate, insisted on the Sanhedrin acting as if it were—and *de jure* was—a criminal court with capital jurisdiction. Therefore, the case had first to be proved in Jewish law.

After that, both parties agreed, the Prisoner was to be handed over to the occupying Power, since the Governor was in Jerusalem and they wished to shift responsibility for the execution onto him. What they were looking for was to prove a charge which involved the death penalty in Jewish law and could then be construed as a capital political charge in Roman law.

Things had to come to an impasse. But Caiaphas thought he saw a solution. He got up and came over to the Prisoner. "I adjure You by the living God," he said, "to tell us whether You are claiming to be the Messiah." This was not exactly administering an oath, but it was a solemn appeal in God's name. The Sanhedrin had never condemned any of the false

Messiah who had taken up arms; it was left to the arbitrament of war to decide God's will. If successful even for a time, a leader might be accepted as the Messiah, as was Bar Cochba in A.D. 135.

Our Lord had to avoid the term, for it was currently used to designate a victorious liberator against Rome. If, without further explanation, He now admitted He was the Messiah, the admission could be turned into a grave political charge against Him before Pilate, as in fact it was, despite His reticence before the Sanhedrin. "If I tell you," He said, "ye will not believe Me. And if I put questions to you, ye will not reply." That is, they would not allow Him to relax current misconceptions by a discussion with them; nor would they accept His claim to be the Messiah in a purely religious sense. Their minds were made up against Him, as a dangerous agitator against what we would nowadays call Church and State.

The trial seemed to be proving abortive. But a sudden new development enabled His judges to pass sentence of death.



## Condemned

Mat. 26. 63-66      Mark 14. 61-64.

Luke 22. 69-71.

THE *Messiah-idea*, perverted by Our Lord on account of its ambiguity, would—and did—provide the basis of a political accusation before Pilate. Even the Pharisees, smarting under the limitation of Jewish jurisdiction, were prepared to use any unscrupulous means for securing an execution by the Roman Government. That is, provided their consciences were satisfied by having a sentence of death first pronounced by the Sanhedrin under Jewish law.

This the high-priest had hitherto failed to achieve. But the critical moment had come. He put the ominous question to Jesus: Are You claiming to be the Son of God? Of course, Caiaphas had no grasp of the Incarnation. But it was notorious, though not easy to prove legally, that He had been asserting for Himself a status which infringed on the divine attributes. "The Jews were eager to have Him put to death, not only because He violated the Sabbath, but especially because He spoke of God as His own Father, thus claiming equality with God" (John 5. 18).

Admittedly the phrase "son of God" could be applied in a moral adoptive sense to Israel and especially to David. Instead of discussing the point, Our Lord made His unique position clear by volunteering a further statement: "You will see

'the Son of Man,' 'seated on the right of the Almighty' and 'coming on the clouds of heaven.' " This declaration, which sounds strange in our ears, could never have been invented; it carries its own guarantee of authenticity. It contained three biblical phrases—from the Book of Daniel and from Psalm 109... which were quite familiar to these rabbis. To contemporary hearers they constituted a claim to sharing God's throne, to possessing transcendent prerogatives, to participating in the divine administration of the world.

They were asserted in this sense by the first Christians. St. Peter writes in his Epistle: "Jesus Christ has returned to heaven and is seated at God's right, with Angels, Powers and Virtues subject to Him." A few years later Stephen defended himself before the Sanhedrin. He came to these words: "I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on God's right." At this the hearers shouted, they covered their ears. Then they rushed at him, hustled him out of the city, and stoned him.

On the present occasion there was no such riot; there could not be, with Pilate in the city and cognizant of the proceedings. There were shouts of horror. Caiaphas tore his clothes in ritual exaltation and exclaimed: "You have just heard His blasphemy. What need have we of further witnesses?" Our Lord, who later took such care to guard Pilate against a misinterpretation of His kingship, made no correction or protest now. He offered no explanation when His words were understood to be a claim to be world-judge, co-regent with God. He deliberately went out of His way to register His claim before the Court of Israel.

Caiaphas had succeeded in manipulating the Council and in securing the agreement of its heterogeneous elements. "What is your verdict?" he asked. And the members shouted:

"Death." Doubtless many of them sincerely believed that blasphemy had been uttered. But they were responsible for their ignorance. He had often given them evidence and proofs of what He now openly proclaimed. Even now they made no investigation. Without further thought or inquiry, they took it for granted that what we now call Christianity was false and blasphemous.

There are liberal Jews to-day who repudiate this trial, which they attribute to the Sadducees. But they are illogical, they are dealing with a side-issue. They merely mean that Christ should not have been condemned to the cruel death of a criminal. But those who deny the Incarnation must agree with His judges. They must logically pronounce Him to be a dangerous fanatic deserving suppression in the politico-religious conditions then prevailing in Judea.

To-day the world, each of us, is face to face with the same inescapable alternative, this fearful either-or. If He was not what He claimed to be—Messiah, Son of God, Judge of the World—He was offending God, He was guilty of blasphemy. Alternatively we accept the confession of Jesus and believe that He is really what He claimed to be. A clear issue, then and to-day.

## Before the Governor

John 18. 28-38.

THE apparently powerless Prisoner who claimed to share the throne of the Almighty could have been treated as a pitiable fanatic; He might have been kept in gaol until He was convinced of the madness of His messianic dreams. But they took Him very seriously. The Sanhedrists decided to procure His immediate execution.

So shortly before sunrise—which occurred at about 5.30 a.m.—a number of chief priests led a police contingent with their handcuffed Prisoner to the Governor's Residence. The Romans used to hold courts very early; and in any case Pontius Pilate had been alerted last night. Passover, commemorating the liberation from Egypt, was a time of dangerous nationalist excitement in the pilgrim-crowded city. So the intention was to have trial and execution finished early, almost before the populace realised what was happening.

The Governor resided permanently in Caesarea, higher up on the coast. But he went on circuit, and at festival-times he came to Jerusalem, where generally he stayed in Herod's second palace, the citadel on the west of the city. There was another palace, the Antonia, from which a Roman garrison dominated the Temple where rioting usually started. It is most likely that Pilate stayed here this Easter. This is now practically certain since the rediscovery of the *Lithostrotion*

(or Pavement) beneath the convent of Notre Dame de Sion just north of the Temple area. Man is now offered in the courtyard where Our Lord was tried, scourged and mocked.

We can see the remains of the gateway where the Jewish leaders stood. They would not enter this pagan dwelling; for according to a rabbinic, not a Mosaic, prescription, this would have unfitted them to eat the paschal lamb that evening. Having swallowed the camel they took precautions against the fly.

Pilate was already in bad humour. For his Commandant's report of the unresisted arrest had thrown serious doubt on the allegation that the Nazarene was a dangerous agitator. He also resented the affront of regarding his premises as contaminated. But he had made a deal with Caiaphas and probably had accepted a present for his acquiescence. Besides, at Passover time he had to be circumspect and to humour these fanatical colonists. So he strode forward to at least speaking distance. "What is the charge ye are bringing against this Man?" he gruffly demanded.

The accusers were taken aback. They were accustomed to dealing with a Governor whose methods with deluded Jews were contemptuously summary. Besides, they had been relying on the secret agreement with Caiaphas. So they were unprepared for Pilate's change of front. It looked as if their slick tactics of reducing the trial to a mere formality had failed. At first they met the situation with evasion and bluff: "If this Man weren't a criminal, we shouldn't be handing Him over to you." Thus they hinted that after an investigation by the leaders of Jewry, any further proceedings should be purely formal.

Pilate was angry at this implicit denial of his jurisdiction. By now he was suspicious of the unchauncy loyalty of these Sanhedrists. He felt he was being tricked into trying a religious

was under the guise of a political crime. With an obliging gesture, which had a hint of irony, he handed the case back to them: "You can take Him away and pass sentence on Him according to your own Law." This forced their hand, they openly admitted that it was a capital case: "We have no authority to put anyone to death."

They did not want a stoning to death, as in the case of Stephen. Later they certainly desired the liquidation of Paul, not utter dishonourment but only an end to his activities; there were no believers in Paul. But they aimed at the crucifixion of Jesus, for this in Jewish eyes would constitute a complete annihilation of His claims. "He that hangs on a tree is accursed." Little did they realise that the Cross, antiquity's greatest instrument of degradation and dishonour, would become the symbol of God's uttermost love for Man and the sign of the world's salvation. "The hanged One"—as the rabbis derisively called Jesus—would draw all men round the throne of His Cross.



*Reconstruction of the Antonine.  
Near the double gateway leading  
into the Lichfield.*

## The King of the Jews

Mat. 27, 11-14. Mark 15, 2-5.

Luke 23, 2-4. John 18, 33-38.

As Pilate insisted on a full investigation and a formal trial, the Jewish leaders had quickly to produce a capital charge. Blasphemy, or infringement of the divine attributes, was not a crime in Roman law. A political charge had to be constructed in order to induce these Gentiles to carry out the death-sentence of the Jewish court. "We have found that this Man has been sedulously inciting our nation, by perverting the payment of taxes to the Emperor and proclaiming Himself to be King Messiah."

It was unlikely that the chief-priests had any testimony to offer beyond their own assertions and vociferations. They had no scruples about uttering these falsehoods, which seem to have made no impression on Pilate. An ordinary Eastern prisoner would have gesticulated and shrieked denial. Our Lord could have calmly refuted them. But, to the Governor's surprise, He maintained a calm, dignified silence.

Pilate decided on a private interrogation of this enigmatic Prisoner. By Roman law he was quite entitled to seek and even to enforce a confession from the accused. "Pilate went back into the Residence and summoned Jesus." He bluntly asked: "Are You claiming to be the King of the Jews?"

There was no irony in the question; messianic claimants had to be taken seriously. Away from the din and facing a man

trying to do his duty, Jesus broke His silence. He wished to clarify the ambiguity, so as not to die under a false charge. So He replied: "Are you asking this on your own initiative, or because others have told you this about Me?" In other words, in what sense was Pilate using the term King Messiah? If the Emperor's representative had information of his own and initiated the charge, then the phrase had a purely political implication. On the other hand, if he was merely transmitting a Jewish statement, then there was a religious connotation in the title.

Pilate hotly repudiated responsibility. "Do You take me for a Jew?" he asked. "It is Your compatriots, indeed the chief priests, who have handed You over to me. So what have You been doing?" Our Lord was now in a position to explain that He was making no claim to an earthly rule dependent on human authority or employing physical force: "My Kingship is not earthly. If it were, My followers would have used force against My being taken by the Jews. Not so. Hence My Kingship is not an earthly one."

Referring to last night's coup, He had—as Pilate knew—refused to make any resistance. The Roman could appreciate the pragmatic argument. But the idea of a spiritual King, reigning over an inner world of sacred loyalty, was beyond him. He could not realize that here was the proclamation of spiritual liberty against a State-imposed religion or ideology, so prevalent in the ancient world and resurrected in our own day.

Pilate accepted Our Lord's disclaimer of any rivalry or hostility to Rome. But he discerned some positive claim which he failed to understand. Hence, off the record we might say, he asked: "So after all You claim to be a King?" Jesus had always avoided this term so liable to misconstruction.



Least of all, could He afford, without provocation, to claim a regal title under the insanely suspicious Tiberius. So He reminded Pilate that it was he who had introduced the term King. He added: "This is why I was born and came into the world; to bear witness in defence of the truth. Whosoever is a friend of truth listens to My voice."

By "Truth" Jesus meant a living religious reality, the concrete revelation of God in Himself. It was not, as Pilate assumed, a purely Jewish question. He claimed to appeal to every seeker after truth, every man with a conscience. He proclaimed the existence of an objective spiritual domain which men may recognise or repudiate, but cannot alter. The idea was beyond this practical administrator. Pilate shrugged his shoulders. "What do You mean by truth?" he asked casually. Then he abruptly went out, ending this momentous interview. History has shown how wrong he was. The creed of this Man, whom he now took to be a harmless visionary, was destined to topple Caesar from his throne, just as it is to-day the only bulwark against a revived and more brutal Caesarism.

## Before Herod

Levi 23. 9-12.

Pilate, probably bringing Jesus out with him, went back to the courtyard and announced: "I can find no case against this Man." There was no law prohibiting an itinerant preacher from describing himself as ruling in the realm of truth. The Governor regarded the affair as a typical religious squabble, also perhaps an intrigue to lead him into a trap. So he should have ordered the immediate release of the Prisoner.

But he faltered when he heard a fresh outburst of charges. The complainants were influential; while he hated these Jews, he also feared them. "They grew more insistent: He is stirring up the people all through Judea by His teaching which He began in Galilee and is continuing here." Hearing that Jesus was a Galilean, Pilate clutched at the chance of using his face and of shifting responsibility. Herod Antipas, who was Tetrarch of Galilee during Our Lord's lifetime, was then in Jerusalem for the Passover. Pilate decided to remit the case to him for advice and report.

Herod had never seen Christ, so he welcomed the Prisoner and His escort. Paying no attention to the charges of the priests, he kept asking Jesus to perform some miracle, to give an exhibition of legerdemain. By entertaining this shirk, by playing up to him, Christ could probably have secured intervention and acquittal. But He treated this adulterer, this murderer of the Baptist, with dignified silence.

Herod, halloed of entertainment, listened to the chief priests accusing the Prisoner of claiming to be King Messiah. He was not a bloodthirsty tyrant like his father; he was a cynic with a touch of superstition. He was cautious too. Having burnt his fingers in the case of the Baptist, he was not going to get involved with the more famous successor. Realising that the issue was treason, this Marston fox was not going to risk being struck by the old lion in Capri.

So he turned the whole affair into a joke, using his body-guard to join with him in treating the Prisoner as a buffoon. A king, forsooth! The very idea was preposterous. He refused to take seriously this throne-claimant who couldn't even qualify as a court juggler. Whatever Pilate thought, Herod could not regard his Nazarene subject as a dangerous rival. It is one of the ironies of history that this petty princeling, who loved to be called king by courtesy, lost his domains nine years later through his own kingly ambition, and died in poverty in exile.

Christ was in his power; He could be crushed by informing Pilate that He was dangerous. On the other hand, he might offend Tiberius as well as the Jewish authorities by a formal acquittal. There was an easy way out; for the question of justice did not cross his mind. He would placate Pilate: His compliments to the Governor, but he was satisfied to leave the matter entirely in his hands. He would vindicate his own status by certifying that it was absurd to regard the Prisoner as a rebel with serious pretensions to his throne.

He expressed his view in concrete Oriental fashion. He sent Jesus back to Pilate, clothed in a festal cape, a bright mantle. The Vulgate interprets this as a white garment; but the adjective need only mean bright-coloured. It was probably the purple garment afterwards used by these soldiers now

escorting Him back, when, inspired by Herod, they indulged in their own rougher mockery.

So, got up as a mock-king, Our Lord was "returned with thanks" to Pilate. Herod also, he pointed out to the Jews, has declared Jesus guiltless of any serious offence. "So I am going to release Him after some punishment." Though acquitted of the capital charge, the Prisoner may have been imprudent and deserved correction. But instead of proceeding with this compromise, Pilate, seeing a fresh crowd arising, thought of an expedient which proved a fiasco.

[The Herodian policy was to carry favour with Rome and to depreciate the local Governor. So Herod Antipas was antagonistic to Pilate and often joined in complaints against him to Tiberius. The serious breach between them may well have been due to the massacre of Galileans mentioned by Luke 13. 1. If we take it literally that "Pilate had commingled their blood with that of their sacrificial victims," the incident occurred at the previous Passover, for which Jesus did not go to Jerusalem (John 6. 4). (Only for the paschal sacrifice did lay people take direct part.) When news of Pilate's action against the rioters was brought to Our Lord for comment, He replied: "Do you suppose that, because they suffered this fate, these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans? No, I tell you. But if ye do not change your ideas, ye will all perish in the same way"—as in fact they did. He repudiated the assumption that God was pledged to be on the nationalist side. Almost by way of apology for his previous conduct, Pilate courteously offered to hand this Galilean Pilgrim over to Herod. (Incidentally we learn that Luke was well aware that on other occasions Pilate was much more severe and cruel.)]

## 75

### Christ or Barabbas?

Mat. 27, 15-18.      Mark 15, 6-10.  
Luke 23, 15-18.     John 18, 39.

APART from the Gospels, there is some evidence of a Jewish custom, probably derived from Babylon, of releasing a prisoner on Passover Eve so that he could join in the Paschal meal. The Romans, willing to make minor concessions to subject peoples, continued the custom of setting free one unconvicted prisoner chosen by acclamation. Though it was early, a crowd began to gather for the purpose; unencumbered by the Sanhedrists' scruples, they poured into the inner court. Probably they knew nothing of Our Lord's arrest, though a few early passers-by may have seen Him.

Among other prisoners there was a man called Bar-Abba. This was a Jewish surname like that of Simon Bar-Yonah or Joseph Bar-Naba. We do not know his forename. But there is some evidence that it was the same as that of Our Lord, namely, Yeshua. He was not a common thief nor a highwayman. He was the ringleader of a guerrilla band operating near the city. He had been captured by the Romans some time before on the occasion of a riot in which lives had been lost. He now lay in gaol, awaiting public execution.

While Pilate was thinking of setting Jesus free, he saw the crowd beginning to stream in. Now he did not want to release the rebel; perhaps he could avoid it. The inhabitants

of Jerusalem were not nearly as nationalistic as the Galileans. They did not approve of futile disturbances and bloodshed in the city; it was bad for trade and often led to reprisals by the Roman garrison. Barabbas was not a great national leader, he could not have had a large number of followers or sympathizers.

On the other hand, the Nazarene was very popular, as we shown on Palm Sunday. Pilate had already come to the conclusion that the chief priests were actuated by jealousy of their influential rival. The political charges against Him had been shown to be faked, they were merely a cloak to hide religious animosity and to use the Governor as a scapegoat. So Pilate was going to release Him anyway.

Then Pilate had what he thought was a brilliant idea. He would kill two birds with one stone by proposing Jesus as the prisoner to be amnestied. This would forestall the selection of Barabbas, a murderous insurgent whom he was most anxious to execute. And it would enlist the aid of the populace against the priests in having Jesus set free. The maneuver seemed to Pilate a wonderful way of escaping from an unpleasant situation. But on two counts it was a fatal mistake.

An unmorged crowd could not come to a decision without argument and discussion. An interval had to be given. Probably Pilate retired to the palace after the receipt of his wife's message. Now a mob can easily be swayed by a small group of determined men who know exactly what they want. The Sanhedrists and their hangers-on dispersed among the crowd and engaged in fierce propaganda. The Governor should not be allowed to force on them the choice of this Nazarene who had proved to be such a failure, first exciting their hopes and then disappointing them with silence and inaction. The Sanhedrists even made an unholy alliance with the extreme nationalists, the Zealots,

who were present. Ironically they urged the release of a man guilty of the very crime of sedition with which they had falsely accused Jesus. And they succeeded in persuading the mob.

Again, Pilate's tergiversation, the adjournment to Herod, had upset Caiaphas' strategy of secrecy and speed. The Governor's latest move proved to be an embarrassment both to him and to the Sanhedrists. Both had now practically abdicated. Henceforth the mob, feeling the taste of power, took the major part in the proceedings. Both sides had to manoeuvre for their support. It was no longer a dignified court of justice; it was what in Communist countries is nowadays called a people's court. Mass-emotion superseded the rule of law, shouts and jeers replaced witnesses. Our Lord, silent and majestic, was subjected to an ordeal which many of His followers have had to face in our own day.

[Summary of this incident. (1) Barabbas was not an ordinary robber, he was a rebel, the leader of a small guerrilla band operating near the city. He was captured in a riot by the Antonia garrison, and kept for Pilate's arrival, to be executed publicly on Passover Eve. It seems likely that Jesus bore the cross intended for Barabbas, and that the two so-called "thieves" were two of his lieutenants. (2) He was not very important, certainly not too popular in Jerusalem whose inhabitants did not want bloodshed. Pilate estimated that Jesus was much more popular and influential. He felt safe in suggesting the release of Jesus in preference to Barabbas. (3) But the Governor did not anticipate the unholy alliance which the Sanhedrists made with the militant nationalists. (4) So the enemies of Christ, who had no belief in rationalism or democracy, played on the prejudices of the people, misleading them into being accomplices in their ultimate destruction.]

## Pilate's Wife

Mat. 27. 19.

THE Antonia Fortress, overlooking the northern porticoes of the Temple, comprised not only barracks for a garrison of several hundred men but also separate palatial quarters for the Governor and his suite. Augustus had not allowed wives to accompany Governors to their provinces. But this prohibition was not enforced under Tiberius. A proposal to renew the prohibition was defeated in the Roman Senate in A.D. 21. So there is nothing surprising in being told that Pilate's wife was with him in Jerusalem.

While he was trying the case, he received an urgent message from her: "Do nothing against this good Man. I had a painful dream this morning on account of him." How did she know about the Jewish Prisoner? And why was she anticipating an immediate condemnation? Clearly, if she was not present last night when Caiaphas interviewed her husband, she subsequently learnt about the agreement they had reached. This confirms St. John's account of Roman collaboration at the arrest.

She was still asleep when at dawn Pilate had come down to start the proceedings. If her dream had occurred during the night, she could have told him before he left. It was all the more terrifying since the Romans regarded early morning dreams as specially veridical. There was the famous case of Calpurnia, the wife of Julius Caesar, who in a dream saw him



covered with wounds, and besought him not to go out. Her proposition proved true ; he went out to his death.

Pilate's wife did not anticipate a violent end to her husband, though in fact he seems to have committed suicide in exile about ten years later. It was of the Prisoner she was thinking; she warned her husband not to carry out his bargain with Calaphus against Him. She was so frightened that she took the exceptional step of warning the Governor while he was officially trying the case. She became convinced that it would be a dreadful crime. Did she perchance hear in her dream some echo of the world-wide chorus of the creed "Suffered under Pontius Pilate"?

It seems clear that to her this was not an ordinary case. She knew about Jesus, she was interested in Him. The apocryphal Acts of Pilate and other writings call her *Procule* and tell us that she was a proselyte. This may well have been so. (*Fulvia*, wife of *Saturninus*, ex-Governor of Judea, was a convert to Judaism ; so was *Poppaea*, later wife of *Nero*.) Later western writers call her *Claudia Procule* and think she became a convert to Christianity, identifying her with the *Claudia* mentioned by St. Paul (2 Tim. 4, 21). The Greek Church keeps her feast on 17th October.

All we know for certain is that within Pilate's home there was sympathy for Christ. Had *Procule* not been interested, she would not have had that foreboding followed by a dream which affected her deeply. To-day we are more familiar with supernatural phenomena. But the Fathers and older carvers were divided into two camps, some attributing the dream to God's special intervention, others regarding it as a Satanic attempt to thwart our Redemption.

St. Matthew is concise and moderate. There is no description of the vision, no emphasis on the supernatural, no attempt to

Christianise Procula. So far from being an attempt to shift blame from Romans to Jews, the message makes Pilate more culpable. Like most Roman—and even modern—scribes, he had a superstitious awe of dreams and omens. So he must have been spurred to make fresh efforts to spare Jesus.

Apart from thus further explaining Pilate's attitude, for us the chief interest of this little episode is that it forms a brief interlude in the remorseless drama. The only voice which was during the trial raised on behalf of Christ was that of a Roman lady.



*The Arca dei Covenant (4th cent.):*  
*Top register (left to right):*  
 Christ ascending ascent, Christ  
 around, Peter's Daniel. Lower  
 register: Christ before Caiaphas,  
 Christ before Pilate.

## To the Cross

Mat. 27. 20-25.      Mark 15. 13-14.

Luke 23. 20-23.      John 18-40.

PILATE came out from the palace, and probably ascended the judicial platform in the courtyard, to hear what prisoner the crowd wished to be unseized, and to accede officially to their request. Presumably Jesus was close by so that he could point to Him; even Barabbas may have been brought out. The Governor addressed the surging crowd, momentarily hushed into expectant silence: "Which of the two do ye wish me to release to you?" The response was a roar: "Not this Man but Barabbas!"

Pilate was dumbfounded; he had been quite sure that Jesus would be chosen, otherwise he would not have taken the risk of consulting the mob. He was within his rights in suggesting the release of Christ; but he was then bound to accept the populace's choice of Barabbas. That left him quite free to release Jesus, as indeed he wished. But he now took the final step of setting up what to-day we call a people's court.

He was obstinate in adhering to the disastrous tactics he had adopted. And he was also weak, for he persisted in trying to release Christ without his having to antagonise the Jewish leaders who, as in the past, could cause trouble for him in Rome. He was still under the delusion that he could put the people against the priests. He did not know that these crafty

men had foreseen his move and had already "conditioned" the crowd in favour of the execution of the Nazarene. Of course the populace had no jurisdiction whatever over His case. It was Pilate the judge who made them the jury.

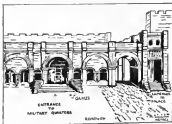
"What then," he cried, "am I to do with Jesus whom ye call King Messiah?" What a pathetic abdication! What an extraordinary question to be put to the mob by a Roman Governor in course of a legal trial! Yet in a sense Pilate was thinking aloud. His query "What am I to do with Jesus?" has been echoed down the ages by his successors. Human governments aiming at monopoly of power do not object to abstract claims. What they fear is a historical person continuing to operate in a living Church for which He says "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

The crowd was only irritated and insulted by his calling this powerless Prisoner their King and their Messiah; they had been well primed by the agents of the Sanhedrin. These latter had unscrupulously allied with their enemies, the physical force patriots, to procure the death of Jesus; just as a few years later they combined in an attempt to assassinate Paul. They paid dearly for their unholy alliance. A generation later, Josephus tells us, "the chief priests, heaping dust on their heads, their beards bared, their vestments rent" vainly appealed to the nationalists not to start the disastrous war against Rome, which ended the Sanhedrin and the nation in a bath of blood.

Pilate was met by a ferocious yell, the cry of a ravenous beast scenting blood: "To the cross with Him!" "What crime has He committed?" was the Governor's weak retort. But there was no longer any question of justice or guilt. The mob was out of control. With mass-hysteria they kept shouting "Crucify Him."

Two months later St. Peter, speaking in the eastern colonnade

of the Temple, addressed the crowd: "Jesus ye handed over and repudiated before Pilate who had decided to release Him. Ye repudiated the Holy Just One, and requested a murderer to be donated to you. And ye slew the Author of Life, whom God has raised from the dead." (Acts 3. 13). Surely a severe indictment. But let us add St. Peter's excuse: "Brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers."



*Reconstruction of the eastern portion of the Jerusalem (Jehosaphat). Entrance to Military Quarters (where Herod's stables and stables); place where soldiers' sword games can still be seen; the actual roadway; and the entrance to Pilate's Palace.*

## The Prisoner is Flogged

Mat. 27, 26. Mark 15, 15.

John 19, 1.

THE proceedings had now almost degenerated into a wrestling-match between the Governor and the Sanhedrin. Undeterred by the tumult and still hoping to sway the fickle Oriental crowd, Pilate announced that he would punish Jesus and then release Him. The Gospel says laconically: "Then Pilate had Jesus taken and flogged."

The order for scourging an innocent man will arouse doubt and astonishment only in those who do not know what the Romans called the disciplinary powers (*coercitio*) of a magistrate. Without formal trial or sentence, he could employ forcible and punitive means during an inquiry, he could even inflict death on a non-citizen (*peregrinus*). This is a feature often forgotten by enthusiasts for Roman Law. Scourging and killing were forbidden only in the case of Roman citizens; hence the protest of Paul and Silas against the magistrates at Philippi.

In Roman procedure scourging could be used in order to elicit information and confession—but not on a Roman citizen, as Paul pointed out to Lydia; it could also be an independent disciplinary punishment; and it was the automatic preliminary to crucifixion. Pilate ordered the flogging of Our Lord, not as a warning to Him to behave more prudently, but by way of compromise, to present Him as a half-victim to the Jews. Though this brutal treatment revolts us to-day, and seemed obsolete until we learnt about concentration camps, it was

purposely inflicted as a device to save Christ from the cross. Many early Christian writers regarded this act as an attestation of Pilate's guilt.

So there in the courtyard, Our Lord was stripped naked and had His hands tied up on a pillar. The Gospels simply give us the stark statement that He was flogged; there is no enumeration of gruesome details, no attempt to harrow the reader's feelings. Many mystics and visionaries, however, as well as devotional writers, have piled up the horrors; describing relays of floggers, exaggerating the number of lashes. But indeed the reality of a Roman flogging was horrible enough.

Jewish scourging was comparatively mild, being limited to thirty-nine strokes. There was no limit in any given case in the Roman punishment. In A.D. 62, Jesus, son of Ananias, a Jew predicting disaster, was arrested by the Governor, Albinus: "Though flayed to the bone with scourges, he neither pleaded for mercy nor shed a tear . . . but responded to each stroke with: Woe to Jerusalem." Many Christian martyrs were flogged to death.

Painters depicting the Scourging of Our Lord have usually marked the wounds as stabs or else as long wounds. The Turin Shroud gives us an accurate delineation. (This is independent of the question of its being Our Lord's shroud, it was somebody's). The instrument used was not the flagellum, knotted thongs which laid the flesh open in long strips. It was the less dangerous flagrum; a small stick with thongs each carrying a two-knobbed bone or two leaden pellets. The severe beating inflicted is shown by the numerous contusions, mostly in pairs, all over the body.

A Roman historian (Dio Cassius) speaks of a hitherto unheard-of outrage inflicted on a king, when Antony had Herod's rival Antigonus scourged before being beheaded. A

Jewish historian (Josephus) expresses his horror when the Governor Florus had well-to-do Jews (Roman citizens) in Jerusalem scourged publicly and then crucified. But when God was scourged, there was no protest, no sympathy. The mob stared avidly at the spectacle. The Jewish religious leaders watched with satisfaction the payment of the first instalment of their revenge. Says Blessed Angela of Foligno: "The Creator so humbled Himself for love of us that He gave irrational creatures—scourges, thorns, nails, cross—the power to do their task against Him." He allowed men with impunity to lacerate His body. He did not, as He could have done, strike them with powerlessness; nor did He neutralise the impact of their blows on His sensitive frame. Angels gathered around in astonishment. And millions of men have since then knelt in spirit, with adoration and love, before that bruised and wounded Figure.



*The Scourge-Marks on the Back  
in the Turin Shroud. The  
Scourge or Flagrum used.*



## The Mock King

Matt. 27. 27-31. Mark 15. 14-20.

John 19. 2-5.

When the squad of soldiers had finished flogging Our Lord, they untied His hands and left Him to put on His clothes over His bleeding body. They knew why they had scourged Him: He was a claimant to the throne of Judea. Yet they had failed to lash the royalty out of Him, they had not broken His spirit. No cries, no shrieks for mercy, no remanetation of chains.

Recollect that these soldiers were not Roman legionaries; they were auxiliary troops composed of Syrians and Arabs, who were then as violently anti-Jewish as their successors are to-day. They resented this Man's alleged pretensions as a monstrous insult to the Empire. Someone proposed a game, a piece of mockery which would humiliate the Prisoner and ridicule the Jewish nation. This idea of a caricature may have been suggested to them by the incident of Herod's clothing Jesus in mock regalia.

Pilate seems to have retired to his private quarters to have refreshment or to discuss the case with his wife. So it may well be that these Syrian mercenaries, who could never be kept in legionary discipline, thought spontaneously of the mockery. But it is more likely that Pilate planned the Ecce Homo scene beforehand, and so instructed his subordinates to

rig Him out as a mock king after the scourging. To the caricature intended by Pilate they then added their own rough home-play.

So they gleefully took Our Lord into the guardroom opening on the courtyard. They shouted to their comrades not on duty to join in the fun. Christ was wearing two garments. They roughly removed the outer one and substituted for it a scarlet cape to serve as the insignia of royal purple. Where did they get it? The simplest answer is that it was Herod's gala cape.

They made Him sit on a stone bench, and proceeded to fit Him out. There were briars near by, rough prickly plants still used in Palestine for firewood. They twisted these into a crown, probably in the form of a cap or a tiara, and clamped it down on His head. What about His sceptre, somebody shouted. So they fetched a stick from the wood-pile, or perhaps it was a soldier's cane; this they stuck into His right hand.

All was now ready. So they lined up. One by one they advanced, genuflecting before Him, as if paying homage or presenting petitions. "Hail, King of the Jews!" they shouted. It seemed great fun to them. But it was not enough. So they started again, this time hitting Him on the head, driving in the briars, with the mock-sceptre. And as they passed, they slapped Him and spat right into His face. They were getting rougher, until a centurion bade them stop as the Governor was returning.

This was how Our Lord's Kingship was first proclaimed! How paradoxical are God's ways! These soldiers, representing the greatest State on earth, derided Him with their burlesque. A little later, the intellectuals—Tacitus, Suetonius, Celsus and the rest—joined in the jokes. And even to-day the wielders

of power and the intelligentsia, brutally or learnedly, mock at His Kingship.

This incident in the Antoria seems gruesome and blasphemous to us. And yet it is consoling. Our Lord will not force men's obedience; they are free to accept or to reject Him. But the same appearance—the seeming impotence of the Almighty—which emboldens so many has won the hearts of millions down the centuries. These Syrian mercenaries never anticipated that their action was a parodied rehearsal of a cult of this Man, which was destined to outlive the throne of the Casars.



*Portion of the Antoria as it is  
to-day under the Current of the  
Danube in Rome*

## Ecce Homo!

John 19. 4-7.

Returning from his private quarters, Pilate saw the Mock King. Either it suddenly occurred to him to utilise the incident, or more probably he had the affair arranged. Striding out to the archway, he declared: "Look! I am going to have Him brought out to you, so that ye may realise that I find no capital charge proved against Him." The Prisoner had been flogged but was not to be crucified. Pilate's statement was weak and cajoling; the Emperor's representative defending himself and begging approval!

What was Pilate's motive? It was hardly a humanitarian appeal; the ancient world, especially in the form of an Eastern mob, was hard and cruel. There may of course have been some Galileans and others who would feel compassion on seeing the bloodily punished Prisoner. But clearly Pilate's main object was to show how ridiculous it was to accuse this flogged and flogged Man of being a dangerous rival of Caesar. He felt he had now met the Jewish leaders half-way. He would appeal to the people by exhibiting this scarecrow King to them. Didn't they agree with him that this poor harmless fellow could now be discharged? The Governor was long since convinced that his Prisoner was politically innocent and was in fact the victim of religious rancour. But he weakly sought popular support for His release, hoping thus to guard himself against the intrigues of the wily Sanhedrists.

So on Pilate's order, Jesus was led out "wearing the crown of briars and the purple cape." He was probably made to ascend the platform near the entrance bays and to stand there beside the Governor. Since the fifteenth century the scene has been wrongly located on the summit of a lofty arch crossing the street. But this arch was the eastern gate to the renovated city built by Hadrian more than a century later; it is in fact built over the pavement which since A.D. 70 lay buried beneath the ruins of the Fortress.

"See," said Pilate, "here is the Man." Just look at the poor fellow! As if transmitting a shiver, Pilate gently pushed Jesus away from him, thereby releasing Him to the people. But once more the people rejected Him, they spurned the proffered gift.

Little did Pilate reckon that his words would make a revolution in human ideals. Calaphas, inspired without knowing it, said: One Man must die for the people. Pilate too was the unconscious mouthpiece of deep significance when he said: Here is the Man. As we hear these words across the ages, they come to us charged with a deeper meaning. The phrase has been taken up, made the text of sermons and meditations. Depicted in art, the scene has melted innumerable hearts.

Every age has its ideal type of man: the Roman stoic, the Pharisaic legalist, the Renaissance humanist, the credulous liberal gentleman, the mass-conditioned communist. But here in this scene was a new ideal of manhood; here was the one Man who has supremely mattered in the world's history. Since that day myriads have bowed down before the Man of Sorrows.

But for his immediate purpose Pilate was a poor psychologist. Some of the ordinary people may have felt some pity. Many of them must have thought their national aspirations were being

mocked by this barlesque Messiah. But the chief priests and their numerous partisans scattered among the crowd were furious at this insult. A Jesus liberated with Roman-inflicted wounds would be a greater danger than ever. He might become more popular and powerful. So at all costs they had to drown any expression of agreement or sympathy. They took the lead as spokesmen. Says St. John: "When the chief priests and the temple-guards saw Him, they yelled: To the cross! To the cross!" "When they saw Him!" The very sight which melts our hearts and excites our love merely aroused them to fury. They chanted a very litany of death, demanding the penalty which only the Romans could inflict. Once more these crafty Jews had, with the help of their partisans, thwarted the Roman Governor.

[When Matthew says (27. 28) "they undressed Him" in order to put a scarlet cape on Him, he implies that He had resumed His clothes after the scourging. It would seem that the mockery was an afterthought. The undressing was probably not complete; only His outer garment was removed and replaced by the pseudo-regal mantle or cape. After the mockery they put "His clothes" on Him, according to Matthew and Mark. But the Greek word is constantly used for the outer garment alone, e.g. Palm Sunday (Matthew 21. 7) and Last Supper (John 13. 4). So in the *Ecce Homo* scene Our Lord should not be depicted as naked except for the purple cape.]

## The Son of God

*John 19. 4-11.*

PILATE was quite unprepared for the fanatical outbreak which greeted the Nazarene as He emerged, bloodstained, crowned, in purple robe. Indignation and astonishment swept over the Roman judge. "Take Him yourselves and crucify Him!" he shouted. "For my part, I find Him guiltless." This angry retort was, of course, not meant as a serious permission to crucify; nor did the Jews so interpret it. What Pilate meant was that he could find no evidence of any crime cognizable in a Roman court. So let the Jews take Him off and have Him tried by their Sanhedrin.

Both sides were now very angry. So the Jewish leaders were stung into blarneying out the fact that He had been already tried and sentenced to death in their own court: "We have a Law. And according to that Law He deserves death for claiming to be the Son of God." Having failed to prove that the alleged regal pretensions of Jesus led to any violation of Roman law, they now openly acknowledged—what Pilate had been suspecting—that their real grievance was religious.

Perhaps the Sanhedrists lost their temper. More probably it was calculated policy. Now that Jesus had been publicly degraded and mocked, they could safely raise the ominous cry: The Law in danger. They would have the populace on their side. It was with this slogan that they had in the past

forced Pilate to remove the votive shields from Jerusalem. It was not only a threat; it was an intimation that the Prisoner would probably be lynched if released.

But Pilate concentrated on the phrase "Son of God" which had not for him the blasphemous implication it had for these Jewish monotheists. For this pagan the epithet was weighted with all the superstitious awe of sacred legends, it evoked the stories of gods appearing among men and punishing interference. Now in a flash Pilate saw that there was something mysterious behind this case. Procule's dream assumed new significance. Had not this Man spoken of coming from another world? Losing his veneer of scepticism, the Governor became perturbed.

He took the strange Prisoner back with him into the Residence for a private interview. "Where are You from?" he demanded. He knew of course that He was from Galilee; what he meant now was: Are You from earth or from heaven? Was He an ordinary mortal or some local divinity in human form?

Whence? Confronted by Jesus of Nazareth, every generation of men have to ask themselves this question. Pilate, credely but earnestly, was the first. But Our Lord declined to answer him. He refused to influence Pilate by working on his curiosity and credulity. And how could He explain the Incarnation to this mythology-minded heathen? Pilate had no right to a theological discussion which would be beyond his capacity and was juridically irrelevant. The Governor had already sufficient information, he had been given the explanation of Jesus' spiritual kingship. The claim, made in the religious court, to be God's Son had nothing to do with the political charge in the Roman trial. Our Lord rested His case on natural law, as does the Church to-day.

Pilate became angry with this amazing Prisoner who would



not reply even to a question put in His own interests. "Are You refusing to speak to me?" he asked. "Do you not know that I have authority to release You as well as to crucify You?" Christ answered: "Except as a concession to you from above, you have no authority at all over Me. So he who handed Me over to you is more guilty."

Our Lord spoke when Pilate interpreted His silence as indicating a repudiation of his authority. No, Pilate had authority; it was from above as He was. But this authority was not an absolute discretionary power, it involved grave responsibility. Far from contesting Pilate's authority, Christ confirmed it and enabled it by asserting that it came from God. Pilate must beware of incurring the divine anger by allowing himself to become the cat paw of these bloodthirsty Jews. This last interview made a great impression on Pilate. Alas! his resolution did not survive the final threat of the chief-priests.

## Christ or Caesar?

John 19. 31-42.

With amazing persistence, reinforced now by something like a religious motive, Pilate emerged from his last interview with Jesus, more determined than ever to insist on His release. We are not given details of his efforts. But finally the Sanhedrists, seeing their prey about to escape, decided to turn on the Governor himself, whose character they had shrewdly gauged from previous encounters. They played their last card: "If you release this Man, you will forfeit the Emperor's friendship. Anyone who claims to be King is setting himself up against the Emperor."

It was a grotesque situation: the leaders of a nation notoriously disaffected towards the Empire reminding the Roman Governor of his duty to the Emperor. Thus, by donning the cloak of loyalty, they turned the tables on him. In their words there was a grim reminder of his past discomfiture. He knew that another appeal to Tiberius would finish his career. Their threat of delivering him to Rome was all the more galling as he knew they made it with tongue in cheek.

Pilate had been arguing with them that a spiritual Messiah made no claim to earthly kingship; he had learned this from the Prisoner. But the Jews brutally intimated that this distinction would seem absurd and suspiciously subtle in the ears of Tiberius, who treated even a derisory claim to royalty as high

treason. Anyone calling himself king in any sense, they said, was Caesar's enemy.

At last they had pierced Pilate's armour. He had gone far to exonerate an innocent Man. But they knew he would not do so to the extent of jeopardising his career and perhaps his life. Fear of the Old Man in Capri worked more effectively than vague uneasiness concerning the damaged status of the Accused whom he knew to be guiltless. Pilate's resistance collapsed. To save himself he decided to commit judicial murder. He had Jesus brought out, and he sat on the curule chair on the rostrum or platform.

He knew he was going to yield to the clamour of these hated colonials. He had previously been accused of executing men without a fair trial; he suspected that the Jews might be laying a similar trap for him now. He determined not only to insure himself against hostile action but also to humiliate and to revenge himself on them by enforcing a public profession of the allegiance they had mockingly adopted to bear him. "Here is your King!" he said with vicious irony. The shout came back: "Away with Him! Away with Him! Crucify Him!" Pressing his sarcasm home, he exclaimed with mock horror: "What! Am I to crucify your King?"

Pilate took a malicious pleasure in urging on them that they were asking a Roman to crucify a fellow-Jew on the sole ground that He aspired to be their King. As he expected, they became more and more enraged. The chief priests answered: "We have no king but the Emperor." Pilate was satisfied that he had extorted this abject declaration of loyalty. Even to-day those who reject the Kingship of Christ often fall into subjection to earthly tyrants.

The tragedy of Pilate has its lesson. He came to the business, not bothering much about the life of an individual

Jew. But soon he became unusually aware of something supernatural in the Prisoner. He had lost any living faith but was still subject to superstitious awe, as is usual in times of religious decay. He was a wistful agnostic who sought for a *via media* between worship and crucifixion: a type for all time of those who reject Christ's claims but profess to admire Christ's character. Lacking a vital creed he succumbed to the call of the State which promised him material benefits if he sold his soul to Cæsar. And, like many a successor down to our own days, he was in the end liquidated by the State.



*Christ before Pilate: From the  
Roman Gospel c. A.D. 580.*

## His Blood!

Mat. 27, 24-25.

"When Pilate saw that he was making no headway but that on the contrary the tumult was increasing in violence, he took water and washed his hands in the sight of the crowd." At this stage the crowd had become more demonstrative, nobly shouting and gesticulating. They did not join the chief priests in professing loyalty to Rome, but they were becoming more fiercely hostile to the Prisoner whom the Governor was trying to save. A mob conscious of power can easily become truculent and cruel. But nowadays we have learnt how a small, determined minority can succeed in controlling an association or in dominating a crowd. So it is difficult to assess how far the violent antagonism to the unsuccessful Messiah was spontaneous or widespread.

Unable to be heard amid the din, Pilate made a dramatic gesture. In the East, symbolical acts were and are commoner than with us. Sitting on the judicial rostrum in the sight of all, the Governor washed his hands. Pagan and Jew alike understood. Pilate thereby declared that the condemnation was something besmirching—"dirty work." And he wished to dissociate himself from it. By thus purifying himself he also tried to avert the evil omen of his wife's dream and to protect himself against the vengeance of any powers connected with the mysterious Prisoner.

For a Roman judge it was a facile and unmanly concession

to lynch-law. Had he not feared being reported to Rome he would have cleared the mob out of the courtyard, instead of practically recognising their right to demand, over his head, the death of Jesus. There may have occurred a moment of silence when Pilate's herald could shout a message to the crowd. But more probably St. Matthew is merely translating the gesture itself into the words: "I am not responsible for this bloodshed. It is your affair."

There was an immediate roar from the crowd: "His blood on us and on our children." That is, they at once accepted responsibility. This is a well-known Hebrew idiom. St. Paul said to the Jews in Corinth (Acts 18, 6): "Your blood on your head." That is: You are responsible for my turning from you to the Gentiles. There is no justification in the present case for inserting a verb—be or come—and making the phrase an utterance of self-imprecation. And even if it were such, was it not cancelled by the prayer of Jesus: "Father, forgive them"?

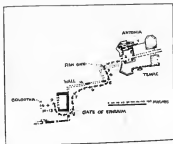
Certain ecclesiastical writers indeed, taking the phrase as an imprecation, almost as a consciously blasphemous prayer, regarded it as answered by God's special malediction. But we must not interpret the ordinary working of history as if it were a specially imposed curse. Our Lord, who wept over Jerusalem and predicted the national disaster, knew that His rejection would inevitably lead to religious rationalism and a contest with Rome.

But we may reverently turn this cry into a prayer: Yes, may His Blood flow on His own misguided people. In the words of Pius XI:

"Turn Thine eyes of mercy towards the children of that race, once Thy chosen people. Of old they called down upon themselves the blood of the Saviour. May it now descend on them, a liver of redemption and of life."

And let us look deeper, beneath the contingencies of history. Our Lord could have overcome His enemies. His Passion was voluntary. It was, indeed, accomplished through the misdeeds of contemporaries, but ultimately each of us was concerned. We cannot shift our responsibility. Cardinal Newman wrote:

"His death-warrant is signed. And who signed it but I, when I committed my first mortal sin? . . . Those sins of mine were the voices which cried out: Let Him be crucified."



*The Way of the Cross, with position of the various Stations.*

## The Way of the Cross

In ancient times sentences were usually carried out immediately, so there was little or no delay after Pilate gave his verdict. The cross was a simple instrument of two rough beams; presumably supplies were ready. Our Lord got the cross intended for Barabbas; his two lieutenants carried their own. It is generally assumed to-day that Christ carried only the crossbeam, to which His arms were tied. But the arguments for this view are not very cogent. It is impossible that the Jews would have tolerated permanently erected upright posts just outside the city; the cursed tree had to be buried.

Our Lord, clad once more in His tunic and mantle, shouldered the heavy cross without protest or complaint. With the hands of a carpenter He lovingly accepted the wood on which He was to die. Hitherto the cross had been the expression of man's greatest dishonour and degradation. But from this moment it became the token of a new religion, the symbol of triumph over sin and death. As Christ bore it along, He made the first sign of the cross—how realistically!—over the world. And when, three centuries later, men exhumed the buried cross, lyrical praises were chanted to it:

*O great and glorious wood,  
With royal blood all dyed,  
Chosen to be the wood,  
Which smelted the Crucified.*

*Cross of Christ, subtlest forest-shoot,  
Never yet did grow your peer,  
In fruit or flower or fruit,  
Nail-pierced stem, you bear a burden dear.*



But all this veneration of the cross lay in the future. On this first Good Friday there was, for human eyes, nothing religious or romantic in the scene. For many, as still in the East, a public execution was regarded almost as a holiday. A platoon of soldiers under a centurion marched in front, roughly clearing a way, pushing people into the side-lanes. A motley crowd of men, women and children, natives and pilgrims, lined the way and peered from the flat roofs. There were yells and jeers, perhaps missiles of mud and stones. Morbid curiosity was reinforced by political passion.

The procession went down the Tyropoeon Valley and then up the slope towards Calvary. Enfladed by His executioners, Jesus staggered slowly forward, dragging His cross over cobbles, down and up stone steps. The journey comprised only about 700 yards. But, unlike the two sturdy bandits, He was not able for it.

Surely, like any martyr, He wanted so much to have the honour of walking cross-laden proudly to His execution. He felt the indignity of exhaustion even more than the shame of carrying the gibbet through a staring, jeering, crowd. How poignantly human was this bodily weakness of Our Lord! In spite of His utmost efforts, He tottered and fell. There He lay in the gutter, prostrate beneath His burden, unable to rise even when beaten and kicked.

Do we realize how incredibly paradoxical is our religion, what a revolution in man's idea of God it ushered in? We adore and love our God most intensely when He is weakest and most human; lying helpless in the crib, prostrate and blood-drenched in the orchard, slapped and spat upon by rough soldiers, lying cross-crushed in a Jerusalem lane.

And so there emerged a completely new attitude to suffering in our lives, beyond the ken of Stoic or Epicurean. "If anyone

wants to be My follower, he must renounce himself and shoulder his cross day by day—thus can he be a follower of Mine.” It sounds harsh doctrine in the abstract. But He has shown us the way and has asked for our companionship. Our little crosses are lightened and ennobled when borne for Him and with Him who carried the burden of our sins to Calvary.



*The Via Crucis to-day—looking back down the slope from the Sixth Station to the Fifth (which is down below on the right-hand corner)*

## Carrying Jesus' Cross

Mat. 27: 31. Mark 15: 21.

Luke 23: 26.

A Jew who had been born in Tripoli was then living near or in Jerusalem. On that April morning he was coming into the city with his two young sons, when he perceived a milling crowd shouting excitedly. Elbowing his way, he soon descried a grim procession of Roman auxiliaries escorting three condemned men. One of them had fallen. He could not rise. No soldier would demean himself to carry the cross. No Jew would touch the accursed and unclean burden. The centurion began to fear that the Prisoner might die en route.

Suddenly Simon heard a command: *Hy, you!* He was roughly seized and commandeered for public service. He was forced to carry Jesus' cross, either aiding Him or more probably taking the whole cross in His stead. Doubtless Simon at first resented this wanton insult; but he knew better than to resist Roman military. Pacing along with his burden in the footsteps of Jesus, amid the hooting populace, he could observe the demeanour of the Man in front. During a pause he heard Jesus speaking to the lamenting women.

There was nothing dignified or mystical in Simon's experience. He had as yet no appreciation of his privilege. But gradually that blessed burden became a grace. Perhaps even before reaching Calvary, he bore the cross not only *after* Christ but *for* Christ. Like a Mass-server, he went with the divine Victim to "the altar of God."

As he came casually into the city that morning, he had no premonition of the wonderful grace that awaited him. He was thinking of harvest-prospects, of preparations for Passover, of purchases to be made in the bazaar. Little did he realize that this was to be the greatest day in his life. And it seemed to happen so accidentally. The centurion picked him out because he looked shabby and unimportant. But the Lord had mysteriously chosen him. From being literally Christ's first cross-bearer he became a follower of the Crucified. Legend says that Simon was martyred as bishop of Bosra in Arabia. We know at any rate that his wife (or widow) was a mother to St. Paul, and that his two sons, Alexander and Rufus were prominent in the early Church.

Of innumerable kings and great ones the very names have perished. But who does not know the name of him who was Jesus' cross-bearer? His name, written in the book of life, is enshrined in the Gospel. His deed is depicted in every church. He is our patron and our pioneer whenever we make the Stations of the Cross.

There is a late legend that a woman called Veronica or Beronice offered Our Lord a cloth to wipe His bloodstained face. It is at least a beautiful story, a parable, the counterpart to the incident of Simon. He was a working man, he gave physical aid. Surely Our Lord thanked him with characteristic courtesy and appreciation; and we know that the good deed brought grace to Simon and to his household. Veronica was a woman, she could give only tenderness and pity. Let us hope, let us imagine, that some kind-hearted woman did thus gently minister to Him on the road to Calvary.

To-day we can play the part of Simon or of Veronica. We were there with Christ not in body but in spirit. Everyone who ever made the Stations was present in His mind. Moreover,

He has appointed successors physically present with us. Me, He said, you will not always have with you; but you will always have the poor and the suffering. We cannot actually carry Christ's cross, nor can we wipe the blood and the spittle from His face. But look around. There is many a one to be helped in carrying His cross, many needing help. These are Christ's lowly brothers and sisters. Whatever we do for them Our Lord takes as done for Himself. Let us not envy Simon or Veronica. Jesus has told us how we can still play their part to-day.



*The Holy Women, as well as Simon, helping Jesus to carry His Cross—group in carved wood (15th century) now in Cluny Museum.*

## The Weeping Women

Luke 23. 27-31.

WHEN Our Lord was engaged in His mission work in Galilee, a number of faithful women—the forerunners of our Sisters of to-day—looked after Him and His Apostles; sewing, cooking, serving. We are inclined to forget, in spite of being told by three evangelists, that these women followed Him from Galilee to Jerusalem for the last Passover. We know the names of some of them: Mary, the Magdalen; Mary, mother of James Minor and Joseph; Salome, mother of James and John. They rarely kept as near as they could to Him as He carried His cross, for they were present on Calvary and waited until He was buried. We also have serious reason for accepting the early belief that Our Lady accosted Him on the road to Calvary as well as being present there.

St. Luke tells us also that a group of Jerusalem women bravely showed their sympathy and grief *en route*. They raised the shrill cry still customary at Eastern funerals. Among ancient peoples a certain amount of liberty was allowed to those about to be put to death. Christ may have been relieved of the cross, or perhaps there was a stoppage until a passage could be cleared through the crowded lanes. So He halted and turned. To all the jeers and insults He made no reply. But He gratefully acknowledged this demonstration of sympathy, this sad farewell. He made His last public address.

"Do not be weeping for Me," He said. "Weep rather for yourselves and for your children." This was neither an

expression of displeasure nor a refusal of compassion. He rewarded their sympathy by showing them a still deeper sympathy in His heart. Only a few days ago He Himself had tearfully and loudly grieved over Jerusalem as He saw it sunlit from Olivet. Now once more He was thinking of His beloved city whose fate, He knew, was sealed by rejecting Him and pandering to Messianic nationalism. As He looked at these tearful women, He forgave them and other women weeping in these streets. The very babies they now held in their arms would, grown up forty years later, undergo the horrors graphically described by Josephus, at Titus' siege of the city.

What is most impressive in His words is not the prediction of doom, but the insight they give us into Our Lord's thoughts as He walked to death. Torn and wounded, stumbling towards crucifixion, He yet was not thinking of His own suffering, but of the guilt of His people and of the fate of the city. There was no faltering, no hesitation, since He emerged victorious from His struggle in Gethsemane.

There is a lesson for us too in His attitude. Even reverent agnostics have compassion for Christ's sufferings and shame that humanity should have thus treated Him. But mere humanitarianism is not enough. To have spiritual values, these sentiments must be based on a deeper conviction. "Christ died for our sins," says St. Paul. We must look beneath the historical contingencies and realize why Our Lord voluntarily submitted to His Passion. Let us not so much weep for Him in His sufferings, let us weep for our sins for which He died. Without this redemptive significance, His case would be merely another instance of the judicial murder of an innocent man.

Our Lord was not merely thinking of the impending fate of Jerusalem. Looking down the ages, He forgave all the calamities

that would befall mankind owing to their rejection of Him. The ultimate evil of the world is this large-scale apostasy, which each of us individually augments or diminishes.

So we can take Our Lord's words as warning all pious women—indeed all of us—who meditate on the Passion or weep before a crucifix, that something more than natural physical compassion is required. Weep not for the Crucified but for the crucifiers, for sinners, for ourselves.



*Our Lord unto His Mother*



## Forgive Them

Mat. 27, 34. Mark 15, 28.  
Luke 23, 34.

On arriving at Calvary, Our Lord was offered a drink of drugged wine. To show His appreciation, He took a sip and handed it back. He would not have recourse to stimulants or drugs to dull His pain. The Romans knew no such humane custom; so we must attribute the kind act to the Jews. In fact we know from the Talmud that there was in Jerusalem an association of charitable women who supplied a narcotic drink to those about to be executed. It would seem that it was these same women to whom Christ spoke *in remem.*

While Our Lord was being stripped and nailed, He prayed in a loud voice: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Clearly this prayer did not merely refer to His executioners, rough soldiers carrying out a routine duty under orders. It was primarily a prayer for His own people who had rejected Him. In the early Church it was debated whether certain sins could be remitted without prolonged penance, or even in this life at all. And in the second century, when relations between Church and Synagogue became very bitter, many found it hard to believe that those who murdered Christ, morally if not physically, could plead ignorance or be thus prayed for. Hence the omission of this verse in so many manuscripts of St. Luke's Gospel.

But less than two months later St. Peter said to his fellow-countrymen: "I know, brothers, that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers." And the first martyr, Stephen, "killing

on his knees, cried with a loud voice: Lord do not charge them with this sin." These were the first echoes of this sublime prayer of Our Lord.

The liberal Jewish scholar Montefiore acknowledged that he could find no "corresponding picture taken from the martyrologies of the Rabbinic literature." Even many Christian martyrs indulged in predictions of vengeance and doom for their persecutors. And we know from Latin literature that poor wretches subjected to crucifixion often broke into curses of hatred and despair, so much so that often their mouths were gagged or their faces covered.

The Mishnah tells us that when near the stoning-place the condemned man was urged to acknowledge his guilt, "for it is the custom of all about to be put to death to make confession, and everyone who confesses has a share in the world to come." He is to be encouraged at least to say: "May my death be an expiation for all my sins." Indeed, at the death-bed of even the greatest and holiest of humans, we expect an expression of penitence, a prayer for pardon.

Had such occurred on Calvary, Jesus would still be numbered among great religious leaders, but His status in the world's history would have been destroyed. So there was tremendous significance in what He did *not* say. He did not say "Forgive Me" or "Forgive My followers." Neither during life nor at death did He show consciousness of sin or utter a word of repentance. He taught us to pray: "Our Father . . . forgive us our sins." He who was sinless prayed for us as the nails were driven into His flesh.

He prayed for them all, and not without result. He prayed for Pilatus, for the Centurion, for those who went away striking their breasts, for the crowds converted at Pentecost. And for us too, for us who so often join His enemies, without

fully realizing what we are doing against Christ and His cause. As St. Robert Bellarmine beautifully says:

"Our High Priest Christ made a consecration for all of us, even before our birth, in that most holy Memento—if I may so speak—which He made in the first Sacrifice of the Mass which He celebrated on the altar of the Cross."



*The Palatine Graffiti (c. A.D. 200) : Romanus gets stretched by a pagan pope-tyrant against a Christian lay who is represented as adoring The Crucified. Inscription (in Greek) : Romanus adores his God.*

## They Crucified Him

THE atrocious penalty inflicted on Our Lord is summed up in the Gospels in the terse phrase: They crucified Him. No details, no comment; neither horror nor anger is expressed. Concentrating on the sacrificial death and on the triumphant Resurrection, the Evangelists had not our biographical interest. Besides, they lived at a time when the gruesome reality of crucifixion was well known, when a forest of crosses could be seen on the Esquiline. Constantine, on his conversion, abolished this penalty; only in our day some sporadic crucifixions have been perpetrated by Communists.

The early Christians, too, shrank from portraying the brutal scene. When the crucifixion was first represented in art, Christ was deliberately clothed in a long sleeveless robe, with His arms horizontal. He was practically standing in front of the cross. Only in medieval times was the suffering or dead Crucified depicted realistically.

So from the dogmatic or devotional standpoint it is not really important for us to try to reconstruct the details. Nor is it possible for us to do so with any certainty. Commentators have been much too sure in drawing conclusions from the very meagre information contained in ancient literature. And the false assumption has been generally made that there was a fixed procedure, that no latitude was left to the executioners, that a crucifixion in Jerusalem was identical in detail with one in Rome.

We do not know whether Our Lord was nailed to the cross on the ground and then raised, or affixed to the standing cross. (In spite of contrary assertions, the latter operation would be mechanically more difficult if nails were used.) It is uncertain whether the feet were separately nailed or fixed with one large nail; the latter operation has been shown not to involve any special difficulty or any breakage of bones. The evidence for either a seat-peg or a foot-rest is very slender.

Unless ropes were used, nails through the palms could not support the body, the flesh would be torn; this has been shown by experiments on freshly amputated arms. Hence it is much more likely that the nails were driven through the wrists; the small bones would be pushed aside without being broken and the strong transverse ligaments above the wrists would support the weight. In this case the nails would injure the median nerves and cause dreadful continuous pain to the victim.

It has been established that the Turin Shroud once enclosed a dead crucified man, whom it is difficult to avoid identifying with Christ. The nails went through the wrists, the arms made an angle of 25 degrees with the horizontal, probably the feet were nailed, left foot over right. These and other details discovered on the Shroud give us a more vivid and realistic picture of crucifixion than any representation in art.

Information concerning the hanging up of prisoners in Dachau, experiments by Dr. Mondler of Cologne, self-suspension by Father Weyland, S.V.D., a sculptor in the U.S.A., have thrown light on the physiological effects of suspension as in crucifixion. The thorax is expanded, the abdomen sunken, breathing becomes more and more difficult, circulation is impeded. It is inferred that death, owing to orthostatic collapse, would usually intervene after a few hours.

All we need retain from all this is that, through these hours

of silence and darkness, Our Lord hung on the cross in increasing agony. His body was immobilised in an abnormal position with great strain on ligaments and articulations, muscles and nerves were under tension, circulation to heart and brain became more difficult, breathing shallower and more laboured. It is profitable that we should realise that crucifixion was a much more painful and horrible drawing-on of death than we could infer from a Crucifix.



*Confirmation of Calvary (about 15 feet high) in Our Lord's story (according to Peter Vincent).*

## On Calvary

Mat. 27. 37, 38-42.      Mark 15. 26-32.

Luke 23. 34-38.      John 19. 19-24.

A PLACARD specifying the condemned man's crime was often hung from his neck or carried by a herald to the place of execution, and then fixed to the gibbet. So it was in the case of Our Lord: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." His Kingship was proclaimed in Aramaic, in Greek and in Latin. Pilate meant this title to be a mocking thrust at the Jewish leaders, not a derision of the Nazarene. The Governor had in fact come to recognise something royal in the Man and dimly to appreciate His spiritual kingship. One might almost call the superscription the first tribute to Christ written by a wise! agnostic.

The chief priests and the rabbis, experts in dissecting texts, soon perceived the sarcasm. They sent a deputation to the Governor, requesting that the wording be altered to "He said: I am King of the Jews." That is: Jesus was not King, but falsely claimed to be so. But Pilate, pleased that they felt his stroke, was in no mood for further concession. He curtly replied: "What I wrote is to remain written."

Having failed to secure an alteration of the offending title, the priests and the rabbis decided to go to Calvary to counteract any sympathy or interest evoked. They had not finished with Him, though He was nailed to a cross. They felt it necessary to indulge in further propaganda. Disdaining to address the Crucified, they shouted to one another: "He saved others,

Himself He cannot save! He is the King of Israel! Let Him now come down from the cross that we may believe in Him."

The Jewish leaders felt safe at last in mocking His powerlessness: they could afford to admit His past fears; they could safely make Him an offer to believe. And to all these taunts the Crucified made no reply, He was silent amid this bacchanal of hate and triumph. The moral crudeness of these educated men seems incredible. But contemporary evidence shows us that even intellectuals can descend to inhuman cruelty in defence of their ideology.

This planned demonstration, this strategy of ridicule, was taken up by the Sanhedrists' henchmen scattered through the crowd: "Ha, You who were going to pull down the Temple and in three days rebuild it! Come down now from the cross and save Yourself!" The onlookers joined in this chorus of mockery. Calvary was no scene of silence or of human decency. There was shouting, whistling, jibing, gesticulating, round the dying Jesus.

We can picture the scene by recalling the mass-executions in Russia in December, 1943, after the Kharkov trial, as reported in *The Times*:

"When the vehicles on which the condemned men stood were moved away, causing their bodies to drop slowly and initiating the strangling process, there went up from the great crowd a hoarse, low growl of deep satisfaction. There were some who showed their scorn of the dying men by adding whistles to the sound of their gapes. Others applauded."

At the foot of the cross four men quietly squatted. They had done their task; they had nailed and hoisted their Man. These Syrians would seem to join with the hated Jews in reviling the Crucified. Besides, these poorly paid fellows were more



interested in their perquisite, the clothes of the condemned. (Surely exegetes are rather fanciful in assigning turban, girdle, sandals, etc., to Our Lord at this stage.) These were two pieces. The first—the outer garment or mantle—was practically a square piece of cloth and was easily torn along the seams into four equal parts. The inner garment or tunic was woven in one piece (like our socks) and would be valueless if torn. So they decided to toss up for it. Then they remained sitting, discussing topics such as games and women, utterly unconscious of the comic tragedy that was being enacted.

Such was the crowd on Calvary: priests and rabbis hurling insults at the Crucified, police and henchmen inciting the mob to hatred and blood-lust, Syrian mercenaries dying for His clothes, and an outer fringe of faithful women.



*Crucifixion of St. Paul and John, Rome  
[c. 900]. Christ, above, is clothed  
in a long shroud gown.*

## The Other Cross

Mat. 27, 44. Mark 15, 32.

Luke 23, 39-43.

On either side of Our Lord there were crucified two lieutenants of Barabbas, guerrilla patriots captured in rebellion. Following later legend, let us call them Gertus and Dismas. Unlike Jesus, who was the butt of insults, these two, like the reprieved Barabbas, were objects of sympathy and admiration as champions of national freedom. Gertus joined in the taunts: "Aren't You the Messiah? Then save Yourself and us too?"

But Dismas, who had been thinking and praying, rebuked his erstwhile companion in arms, and openly sided with Jesus whose serene gentleness had so impressed him. Undeterred by the condemnation of this "people's court," heroically sacrificing his own popularity, he raised his solitary voice in defence of Jesus. He was the first Jew thus to acknowledge a crucified Messiah.

Gertus wanted to be miraculously rescued. But Dismas would ask for no alleviation or escape. The other world was becoming more and more real to this poor fellow whose life was ebbing out on a Roman gibbet. During his rough life he had been guilty of misdeeds; he accepted his death in expiation. He even saw the error of his messianic nationalism. So he turned his eyes towards the central cross. "Jesus," he cried, "be mindful of me when You return as King."

Here we have the first example of the invocation of the

name of Jesus at the hour of death.<sup>1</sup> Dismas was also the first to accept the kingship proclaimed in the title affixed by Pilate's order. Is there another comparable instance of such marvellous faith? Everything seemed to give the lie to Christ's pretensions. His followers hung back. His enemies were triumphant. There was nothing regal about that bruised and battered figure, suspended powerless and motionless on a cross, with a briar-crown and a derisive placard as the only tokens of royalty.

Yet, despite appearances, Dismas attributed to Jesus a kingship in the realm of the dead, which would one day be manifested on earth. He had the simple belief that one day Jesus would return to earth to inaugurate the messianic era. Dismas hoped to be remembered then.

Our Lord had ignored the insults of the priests and the jibe of Gentia; He heard them all in silence. But He instantly answered the humble prayer of Dismas: "Amen, I say to you, this very day you will be with Me in Paradise." This great Amen, spoken from cross to cross on Calvary, has resounded in men's ears down the ages. For it was a solemn assurance, an unflinching pledge, given by One who even on the cross was calmly conscious that He could bestow eternal life.

He gave much more than He was asked. To-day, even before sunset; not remembrance in the distant future, but companionship in the present—"with Me." The dead, says St. Paul, are "with Christ." Dismas was the first to be promised this; he was the only saint to be canonized in his lifetime.

We need not seek in the phrase "Paradise" the theological development of a later age. Our Lord, speaking in Aramaic, probably said "the Garden of Eden." In current Jewish belief this was the alternative to Gehenna. On Jewish tradition

<sup>1</sup> The Latin Vulgate reads "Lord" instead of "Jesus," evidently a recent correction.

one may read a prayer that the deceased may be in Gan Eden, Dismas would have no tombstone; his body would be thrown anonymously into some pit. The Jewish leaders would consign him as a renegade to Gehenna. But Christ entered his name in the book of life.

The Saviour, dying for a sinful world, focussed attention on a single soul. How paradoxical, how consoling! We need this lesson to-day in this era of collectivism. There is room for each of us individually and uniquely in the Heart of Jesus. "He loved me and delivered Himself up for me." Paul said this; Dismas could have said it; it is true for each of us. So let us look at this other cross; let us learn from St. Dismas to turn humbly and confidently, however sin-sodden, to Jesus Crucified.

[In the life of Porphyry, Bishop of Gaza († 420), we read of a vision which he had when, in severe illness, he lay down near Calvary:

"I saw the Saviour nailed to the cross, and one of the bandits hanging on another cross near Him. I began to cry out in the bandit's words: 'Remember me, Lord, when You come as King.' In reply the Saviour said to the crucified bandit: 'Get down from the cross and save this man lying there, even as you were saved.' So the bandit got down from the cross, took me in his arms and kissed me. Then stretching out his right arm, he raised me up, saying: 'Come to the Saviour.' "

The crucified Dismas is still for us an invitation to turn humbly and confidently to Jesus Crucified. Once there was great devotion to Dismas. But the cult began to decline in the seventeenth century, for the Jansenists did not like this fellow who was so factively and belatedly smuggled into Paradise.]

## The Mother of the Crucified

John 19. 25-27.

AT the outskirts of the crowd there stood a faithful band of women "who had accompanied Him from Galilee and had been waiting on Him." When the first wild outbreak of jeering had died down and many people had gone away, a small group—"His Mother and His Mother's sister, Mary of Klops and Mary Magdalen," accompanied by John—drew near and stood close to the cross. With wonderful reticence the evangelist in one brief sentence tells us of this pathetic scene, whose bleak pathos has inspired saints and artists down the centuries.

His Mother stood beneath the cross. "Mary," says St. Ambrose, "did not fall short of what was fitting for Christ's Mother. When the Apostles ran away, she stood by the cross. With loving eyes she gazed on the wounds of her Son." Her hands which had fondled Him as a baby were aching to give Him relief on His bed of pain, to wipe the blood and sweat from His dear face, to moisten His parched lips. Every pang that He suffered was a sword that pierced her heart.

Our Lord, who was so sorry for the women who befriended Him on route, must surely have felt His Mother's compassion, her co-suffering. Says St. Augustine:

"Lord Jesus, it is not surprising that You felt not only Your own pain but hers also. For she never deserted You: not in infancy, not in manhood, not in the Passion. She nursed You as an infant, she heard and followed You as a preacher, she saw and accompanied You as a sufferer. She heard the insults, she gazed on Your wounds." In Jewish law, a dying man could make a valid will orally.

Jesus had nothing to leave; even His clothes had been diced for; shortly, rich friends would have to bear the expense of His burial. But He wished to provide for His Mother. How wonderfully human was Our Lord, how perfectly a man, how ready always to deal with individual souls and not with abstract humanity, how observant of the natural duties which bind all men. Plato tells us that, while awaiting death, Socrates wished to give a frigid dissertation on pleasure and pain. So he asked someone to take his wife and child away. What a contrast between Athens and Jerusalem!

The hands which had wrought blessing and cure were now nailed fast; immobile were the feet which had carried Him to the sinful and sorrowful. All He could do was to move His head slightly and to look with blood-dimmed eyes on Mary and John. 'He said to His Mother: Woman, there is your son. Then He said to the disciple: There is your Mother.'

Says St. John Chrysostom: "On the Cross He entrusted His Mother to the disciple, thus teaching us even to our last breath to show every care for parents." The Fathers are also unanimous in emphasising that the selection of John shows that Mary had no other children but Jesus. "From that time the disciple received her into his home." This does not imply that there and then he led her away; John stayed to the end, and so did Mary. But the text means that a lasting arrangement began in consequence of this commission. Henceforth John was Mary's filial guardian, her private chaplain.

There was, of course, a deeper spiritual significance in this. John, receiving the legacy of Jesus' Mother, represented us all. But Our Lady's spiritual maternity is not dependent on a free and almost accidental donation of Christ. It is based on each of us being another Christ, a member of His Mystical Body. Origen, in the third century, wrote:

"No one can grasp the meaning of John's Gospel unless he has leant on Jesus' breast and has from Jesus received Mary to be his Mother also. Whoever is to be another John must like him be capable of being designated by Jesus as if he himself were Jesus. Mary has no son but Jesus. So Jesus says to His Mother, 'There is your son,' and not 'This man is also your son.' That is, he says equivalently: 'This is Jesus whose Mother you are.' "



*Photographic negative of the River on the Street*

## My God, My God!

Mat. 27. 46-47. Mark 15. 34-35.

**Agony.** Our Lord had spoken to Dismas and to His Mother, He lapsed into silent agony for several hours. The sky became overcast, the city and surroundings were plunged into darkness. As the moon was full, it could not have been an eclipse. The early Christians regarded the phenomenon as miraculous; and a pagan called Thallus, writing in Rome about A.D. 50, combated their view. Many similar instances have been recorded, even in Jerusalem. So the incident may have been providential without being a miracle. The mysterious darkness which enveloped Calvary must have deeply affected those present, many of whom fearfully groped their way back to the city.

About three o'clock in the afternoon the sun suddenly reappeared and shone on the face of the Crucified who was turned towards the west. With a loud voice He cried out: "My God, My God, why did You leave Me thus?"

There was neither despair nor doubt in this prayer, not even a complaint. From the moment Jesus walked out of Gethsemani, He unflinchingly faced death. He prayed for His enemies, regally He promised Paradise to His fellow-victim, with loving solicitude He provided for His Mother. And now He solemnly intoned the first words of the Psalm (21) which contained the prophetic history of the Passion. Here are some verses:



*My God, My God, in this my grief,  
O why hast Thou abandoned me?  
Why art Thou far from my relief  
When I in anguish cry to Thee?*

*Thou dwellest in holiness, art just.  
And Israel, praising, felt Thee nigh.  
In Thee our fathers put their trust,  
And Thou didst save them from on high.*

*But I, behold, observed by all,  
No man, a very woman, am I.  
Scorn and reproaches on me fall,  
Despised by every passer-by.*

The troubled opening of this ancient Song led to a victorious close; beginning in deep distress, it ended in serene assurance:

*To all my kin I will shout Thy Name,  
In full assembly Thy praise proclaim.  
Ye that fear the Lord, announce His praise  
People of Israel, reveal His ways.*

*Even those dwelling at earth's bounds  
To the Lord will gratefully return  
And all the heathen now and  
Down to our God will bow.*

*To Him we shall I be alive.  
My descendants will surely arise  
To tell generations yet to run:  
This is what the Lord has done.*